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takahaki

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ARIFURETA:

ARIFURETA SHOKUGYOU DE SEKAISAIKYOU

FROM COMMONPLACE
TO WORLD'S STRONGEST





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TIO

"IT APPEARS YOU UNDERESTIMATED ME. WHO DO YOU THINK I AM?"

**CHAPTER I: THE OVERPOWERED VAMPIRE PRINCESS
AND THE GODLIKE RABBIT'S GRAND BATTLE**

CHAPTER II: THANK GOD SHE'S STILL A PERVERT!

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Chapter I: The Overpowered Vampire Princess and the Godlike Rabbit's Grand Battle

Hellfire covered the earth, burning everything in its path. The cloying stench of blood filled the air, clinging to clothes and skin. Screams of terror, angry yells, and muffled explosions mingled together, creating a cacophony of chaos. This was a battlefield. However, it was by no means a typical one.

“You damn monster!”

For one thing, a monster was present. Though she looked like an incredibly beautiful girl with doll-like features, she was a monster. She looked to be in her mid-teens, with flowing golden-blond hair and crimson eyes that glittered like rubies. She was wearing a frilly crimson dress that matched the color of her eyes, and her face was flushed. Her grace and beauty were a stark contrast to the filth and grime that covered the rest of the battlefield.

That wasn't the biggest reason why this was an atypical battlefield, though. No, the biggest reason was that she stood alone against an army five thousand strong.

“Crimson Javelin— Thousand Blossoms.”

Her voice carried across the battlefield, clear as a bell. Enchanting as it was, it also spelled a merciless end for her enemies. Another wave of hellfire washed over the battlefield due to the actions of a single girl. After traveling a set distance, the fire rose skyward and split into a thousand spears.

A single glance was enough to tell the soldiers watching that there was no escaping from the reaper's scythe. They would be burned to cinders here and now.

“P-Put up your barriers! Everyone, we need anti-fire—”

The army's commander shrieked, but he had reacted too slow. And that delay would prove to be fatal. Though, even if the soldiers had managed to erect barriers, the result would have been the same.

Crimson fire rained down on the army. Valiant soldiers were blown away like leaves in the wind. The few barriers that had been erected were obliterated without a trace, their casters incinerated. All that remained after the torrent ended were charred corpses and mortally wounded soldiers writhing in pain.

Even those who had been outside the radius of the attack were too shocked to move. They'd just watched a thousand of their comrades get annihilated in the span of seconds.

"So this is... the power of the country of demigods... the power of the royal vampire line..."

The soldiers looked up at the girl in terror. Vampires were a feared race. They were capable of both strengthening their physical abilities and amplifying their mana by sucking the blood of others. On top of that, their bodies regenerated and they lived for far longer than any other race. Though they were the least populous race, their power was immense, which was why despite the vampire nation being a small one, it was known as the "country of demigods" to others. Because vampires also sucked the blood of others, they were feared by the other races. But at the same time, the rulers of other nations all knew that anyone who managed to conquer the vampire country would be able to rule over the world. And the princess of this vampire country that everyone both feared and coveted was the blonde-haired girl who had just ravaged the army.

"...I have a message for you insolent fools who would dare invade my homeland. Retreat now if you value your lives. Or else, perish."

She spoke softly, but everyone heard the princess' declaration. Not only was she facing an entire army alone, but she was also doing so without the slightest hint of fear. Her might was overwhelming. And her majesty so overbearing that it made one instinctively wish to serve her. She truly was fit to be a princess.

"... All troops, advance! Don't falter! Our opponent is a lone girl! We have the advantage in numbers!"

For a moment, even the enemy commander was charmed by the princess. But then, he regained his senses and ordered a charge. The commander was a short, fat man who had elected to remain at the rear. The greed in his eyes was unmistakable. He didn't just want the country, though. He also wanted to make the beautiful princess before him his own. However, his lust had led him to make a foolish choice.

"Utter folly. You shall pay for your transgressions with death."

An hour later, the entire army had been reduced to ash.

"Your Majesty, that was a splendid battle."

A middle-aged man wearing a tailored military uniform reverently offered the princess a cup of water. His most striking feature was his curled handlebar mustache.

"Thank you, Ubaldo. But that army was a mere diversion meant to dilute our forces. The troops were clearly lacking training."

The princess' gaze was far gentler than the piercing glare she had given the army she'd faced earlier.

“Besides, you had brought your men to support me in case I needed assistance, so I had nothing to fear.”

“I am not worthy of such praise, Your Majesty.”

The man known as Ubaldo looked fondly up at his princess. In truth, the imperial guards he'd brought with him felt a little conflicted that they hadn't even been necessary. Still, they looked up at their princess with respect and admiration. The princess took a sip of water, refreshing herself after the rigors of battle and healing her exhaustion.

“Your Majesty. Shouldn't you rest?” Ubaldo asked hesitantly. He was the captain of her royal guard and had spent a great deal of time with her. The princess certainly was strong; the strongest vampire in Avatarl, the country of vampires. In fact, she might have been the strongest mortal currently alive in Tortus.

From the moment of her birth, she had possessed an unbelievable amount of mana. Furthermore, her beauty was so great that it was known across the world. During her youth, her tutors had been amazed at how quickly she'd absorbed the fundamentals of magic and mastered her studies.

Most importantly, at the age of twelve, she'd discovered something else about herself. She could cast magic without using incantations, meaning she could directly manipulate mana. So long as she visualized the magic circle in her mind, she could cast any spell instantly. On top of that, her special magic, automatic regeneration, meant that she was immortal so long as she had mana. That particular ability was so rare, people only knew of it from records. The vampire heroes of old had possessed that ability, but no one else had been born with it since.

Right now, the world was in a state of turmoil. Wars were constantly breaking out over religion, economics, resources, and even petty things like pride. Countries large and small were coming and going. From the start, Avatarl had been a closed nation. It had cut off all diplomatic ties with other kingdoms. Geographically, it sat at the southwestern tip of the southern continent. It was also self-sufficient, so it had no need to trade with other countries. As far as Avatarl was concerned, the rest of the world could fight all they wanted. Their stance was to not get involved.

That being said, they couldn't avoid being invaded by other countries. Dominion over the vampire race and the princess' hand in marriage were just that tempting a prize to other countries. In which case, it stood to reason that the princess would use her overwhelming might to defend her nation. That was the duty of a sovereign, after all. More importantly, the princess herself wished to protect her beloved subjects and retainers.

However, the princess was still young enough that she needed to

be protected herself.

“I’m fine, Ubaldo.”

Naturally, that wasn’t enough to assuage Ubaldo’s worries. While he was one of the princess’ retainers, he was also one of her guardians.

“But Your Majesty, these past few weeks you have hardly slept at all. You should have left this diversionary army to us. Also, it’s not proper for you to run off to the battlefield while still in your dress. You departed the moment you heard the report.”

“Ugh... What choice did I have? There were villages in the army’s path...”

“Every single one of our country’s citizens are skilled warriors. Even if they couldn’t defeat such a large army, they could easily have evacuated. Furthermore, that still doesn’t answer why you didn’t leave the enemy to us.”

“B-But... If I show the enemy how powerful our princess is, then they’ll hesitate to strike again and—”

“Certainly, that is the duty of a sovereign. But Your Majesty, it has been three years since you took to the battlefield at the tender age of twelve. The world is already well aware of your power, so please, allow us to at least handle enemies of this caliber. In the first place—”

“I never like it when you start a sentence with ‘In the first place,’ Ubaldo.”

The princess puffed out her cheeks and turned away while covering both ears with her hands. A rose-red blush spread up her cheeks. Even the way she pouted was cute.

“Your Majesty...” Ubaldo furrowed his brow. His subordinates had grown accustomed to this scene, and they all snickered quietly.

Ubaldo had served the princess since her birth, and he was more like a grandfather to her than anything. At the same time, Ubaldo treated the princess more like his granddaughter than as his liege. It was for this reason that he felt comfortable scolding her. Seeing that Ubaldo was about to launch into one of his tirades, the princess hurriedly changed the subject.

“A-Anyway, how is my uncle faring? He went to subdue the enemy’s main force, but I’m sure he can handle anything they might throw at him.”

Ubaldo knew she was trying to deflect, and he smiled ruefully.

The princess was turning fifteen this year. In vampire society, fifteen was when one was officially recognized as an adult. Thanks to her special magic, her body had stopped aging when she’d turned twelve. When she went to the battlefield, she looked like the incarnation of a war god, but around those she was close to, she still looked like a child. Ubaldo knew he shouldn’t let her childish looks

charm him, but he couldn't help but spoil his beloved princess anyway. Naturally, the princess' other retainers were just as susceptible to her charms.

Ubaldo cleared his throat and returned to being his princess' advisor.

"Fear not. Our army holds an overwhelming advantage. However, the enemy has fielded two whole divisions, so the battle will take time."

"I see. In that case, I need to—"

As if interrupting the princess, a single bird dove out of the air. It was the size of a pigeon and had pure white feathers. However, its eyes were a dark crimson, meaning it was a monster. Still, rather than put her on her guard, the appearance of the bird monster made the princess light up in joy. The reason the princess wasn't afraid was because this bird was her uncle's familiar. Her uncle possessed the unique ability to control monsters. That was another reason why Avatarl was referred to as the country of demigods by others.

The princess held out her arm and the white bird alighted atop it.

"The enemy forces have temporarily retreated. I have left the first division to keep an eye on the situation and am returning home."

This monster's special magic was Telepathy, which the princess' uncle was utilizing to speak directly inside the princess' mind. The princess smiled upon learning that her uncle was safe, and the battle won.

"That aside, what were you thinking, heading into battle still wearing a dress? You foolish tomboy, when will you learn?"

The princess' smile froze. After a brief pause, she slowly turned toward Ubaldo, her neck creaking like a badly-oiled door. Ubaldo grinned at her and nodded. The other imperial guards were grinning as well.

You betrayed me! Bereft of allies, the princess had no choice but to accept that she had a lecture waiting for her upon her uncle's return.

"I-I need to make a report to fath—"

"It has already been taken care of, worry not."

"I-I need to go do—"

The princess surreptitiously attempted to escape, but—

"Where do you think you're going?"

"U-Uncle!?"

Upon whirling around, she found herself face-to-face with her uncle. Like the princess, her uncle had blonde hair and crimson eyes. His long hair was tied into a knot at the back, and though his face was wrinkled, he still looked quite attractive. His name was Dienleed Galdea Vesperitio Avatarl. He was the king's younger brother and the country's prime minister. As a warrior, his strength rivaled the

princess'. He looked down at the princess with a smile. Though his smile looked genuine, he was wreathed in a menacing aura. Even the two one-eyed monster guards standing behind him backed up a few steps.

"Your automatic regeneration ability is dangerous. It's caused you to grow conceited."

"Th-That's not true!"

The princess shook her head, tears welling up in her eyes. She looked like a child who'd just been caught pulling a prank.

"With all due respect, Your Highness, it's thanks to Her Majesty's efforts that there were no casualties."

"Ubaldo!"

The princess turned gratefully toward Ubaldo. She'd feared her doom was set in stone, but now a single ray of hope had appeared. The other imperial guards also voiced their support for the princess. When their beloved princess started crying, most people couldn't help but pity her.

In truth, the imperial guards also wanted the princess to stop being so reckless and to rely on them more but they couldn't help but spoil her anyway. The princess turned back to her uncle and said in a pleading voice, "I promise I won't do it again, so please don't get mad."

Sighing in resignation, her uncle replied, "Sheesh... Just don't worry me so much, okay?"

Dienleed smiled again, but this time his smile was full of genuine warmth. He gently patted the princess' head.

"Yes, Uncle."

"Good. Now then, let us return home and rest."

Smiling lazily, the princess nodded and followed after her uncle. Her guards followed after her, chatting happily.

"Isn't that great, Your Majesty?" "Now you can rest without worry." "The head maid said she prepared sweets for your return."

The princess had an uncle who loved her, and retainers she could trust. So long as they had her back, she wouldn't lose to any invader.

"Oh, yes."

Her uncle called out to her, his voice as kind as always.

"What is it, Uncle?"

The princess responded, smiling.

"Would you be so kind as to die for me, Aletia?"

She turned around just in time to see a maw of blue fire swallow her whole. "Ah!"

A sharp pain ran down Yue's right arm and she let out a wordless scream. At the same time, the vision she'd been seeing faded away like

a watercolor melting in the rain. Reflected in her eyes instead was a mirror image of herself. No, not quite a mirror image. Her copy had black hair and golden eyes and was grinning maliciously.

Yue was up against the Frost Cavern's latest trial, and it had just given her a rude awakening. Not only had her right arm been torn off, but she'd also eaten a Sapphire Serpent at point-blank range. She used gravity magic to right herself as she hurtled through the air, and restoration magic to fix her clothes. Just before she slammed into the wall, she used gravity magic to stop herself. Before she could recover her stance, though, she was assailed by a wave of her copy's gravity magic.

"Heavensfall!"

"Obsidian Vortex!"

Yue neutralized the wave of pressure with her own gravity magic. In that time, her regeneration completed, and she thrust out her right arm to cast her favorite spell.

"Draconic Thunder!"

"Fufu. Draconic Thunder!"

With a ferocious howl, the two golden dragons clashed. The gravity magic cores of the two dragons pushed against each other, causing the electricity around them to twist and warp. The atmosphere looked like it was bending. Ignoring the clash, Yue modified her own gravity to fall sideways and launched her next attack.

"Ice Javelins— Centurion!"

"Ice Javelins— Centurion!"

The two were evenly matched. No, more than that. Yue and her copy were firing off spells at exactly the same time. Two hundred spears of ice slammed into each other, causing shockwaves to spread across the sky and shards of ice to rain down.

"Void Fissure!"

"Void Fissure!"

The space around them ruptured. Yue and her copy had used a spatial magic spell to distort space around each other. The resulting explosions were so powerful that the giant ice tree in the center of the room cracked, and splinters of ice fell from the ceiling.

Forced back by the explosion, Yue slid across the ground while using gravity magic to stay upright. Both Yue and her copy lashed out with gravity magic, trying to take control of the large chunks of ice hitting the ground. Bursts of golden and red mana clashed. Neither side was able to gain full control, and the chunks of ice started breaking apart as conflicting gravity fields exerted their forces over them.

"You're quite persistent, considering I showed you those visions of

the past.”

“I hate how you talk...”

“Isn’t it how you used to talk, Aletia?”

“Don’t call me by that name...”

“Make me.”

Irritated, Yue swept her hand to the side, sending a barrage of ice chunks at her copy. Her copy grinned and imitated the action. Both Yue and her copy then had to make the split-second decision of which chunks they would use to offset their opponents, and which they could allow through and destroy personally. They did all of this while also unleashing a barrage of wind blades with pinpoint accuracy.



Upon entering the Frost Caverns, the party had been forced to make it through a maze of insidious whispering all while fighting various monsters along the way. And, at the end of it all, they'd been presented with a glowing doorway. But as expected, the doorway had been a portal that had split the party up before foisting another trial on them.

After walking down a long corridor, Yue had come face-to-face with her copy, sealed within the ice tree at the center of the room. She had then begun fighting with her copy, and quickly realized her copy's abilities were perfectly matched with hers. That truth had been shoved into her face multiple times, after all.

On top of that, though, she was also forced to relive her old memories. It was like the dream world she'd been shown in Haltina's labyrinth, but instead of an ideal world, she was being shown her worst nightmare.

Aside from the very last thing her uncle had said, everything in Yue's memory had been accurate. That had been her past, the past she hadn't thought back to even once since meeting Hajime. For the past three hundred years, those memories had been locked away deep in her heart.

And now they were being forcibly dragged to the surface.

She's probably using spirit magic to make me relive my memories... I thought I was guarding against that, but it seems not.

Yue and her copy were perfectly matched in terms of power. But because Yue kept on being unbalanced by her memories she was losing the initiative.

Furthermore, there was something else she'd realized after confronting herself. She was strong. Unbelievably so. To the point where it was just unfair for her enemies.

"You piss me off..." Yue muttered.

"Don't forget that I'm you..." Yue's copy giggled to herself.

God, how annoying... However, that was indeed how Yue had spoken before being sealed. Over the course of centuries, though, she'd come to realize that the faux-polite style of speech used by royalty was utterly ridiculous. And so, she'd dropped it entirely. It helped that she hadn't talked for ages until she met Hajime, too. But her transformation was precisely why she hated her copy, who was acting exactly like the old her. Annoyed, Yue summoned twelve lightning dragons.

"There's no one you can trust in this world."

Anything Yue could do, her copy could do as well. It countered Yue's dragons with twelve of its own, all while goading her.

"The uncle you trusted so much, even Ubaldo and the others, they

betrayed us. What more proof do you need that no one can be trusted?"

"....." Yue went silent as she was shown another flashback.

"You fought and fought and fought for your country, but in the end..."

Yue had gone off to the battlefield the day she'd turned twelve. Since then she'd witnessed the deaths of thousands, and killed far more with her own two hands. Naturally, that had made her hated by many.

It wouldn't have been surprising if she'd broken under the mental trauma of so much hate and death. Or if she'd buckled under the pressure and expectation placed on her by her countrymen. However, her love for her country had given her the strength to pull through. The knowledge that she was protecting people close to her. And yet—Yue's memories swallowed her. By the time she returned to her senses, it was too late. She was in another vision.

This time she was in the throne room. A crimson carpet ran down the middle of the room, bisecting it evenly. Standing in the center of the room was Aletia, clad in a similarly crimson dress. She'd been crowned queen at the tender age of seventeen, and three years had passed since then.

Normally, her father, King Lambert, would have reigned for another thirty years. The early shift in sovereigns hadn't occurred because Aletia had usurped her father. It had just been necessary.

Aletia's overwhelming achievements and her tireless defense of Avatarl had made her respected by her countrymen and feared by her enemies. Most enemy states had given up attacking after suffering staggering casualties. Their kings and lords had all been forced to accept that Aletia was far above them.

Though her appearance hadn't changed at all since she'd turned twelve, her beauty had taken on a mature allure over the years. It was in part due to the fact that her appearance hadn't changed that everyone found her so divine. In fact, some people had actually started a cult to worship her.

At one point, the leaders of the humans' religion had asked to meet with her so that they could appoint her as their new god. That had, of course, been completely unprecedented and ended with the world accepting that Aletia was some manner of divine being. The queen of Avatarl was someone who was loved and worshiped by everyone across the world.

King Lambert had decided not to fight the tide of his daughter's rising popularity and had gladly abdicated the throne to her. Not long after, princes and lords from every nation had come to ask for her hand in marriage. Every nation knew that if it was able to form an

alliance with Avatarl, they'd be safe from the chaotic wars that plagued the land. In fact, even the frequency of those wars had begun to drop thanks to Aletia's presence. Or so it seemed at the time, at least.

"Will you let us take care of it then, Your Majesty?"

"Yes, you may."

"Understood. By your leave, then."

"Ah, Uncle!"

Aletia had finished seeing the foreign messenger who had come to visit and was in the middle of a meeting with her uncle, Dienleed. He'd been expressionless throughout, and now that he'd concluded his business he turned to leave. Not wanting him to go just yet, Aletia called out to him.

"What is it?"

"I was just thinking, maybe we could eat dinner together. We haven't spent much time together in a while, and I could use your advice."

"Is that an order?"

"Huh? No, of course not..."

"Then my apologies, but I must decline. There are many matters that require my attention."

"I see..."

"Good day to you," Dienleed said as he hurried out of the throne room as if loathe to spend even another second in there.

Aletia watched her uncle leave the room with a crestfallen expression. Not once did he turn around. There was a dull thud as the doors shut behind him, leaving Aletia all alone in the throne room.

"....."

How long had it been since her uncle had started acting distant toward her? When he'd quit as her tutor? When he'd last eaten dinner with her on her birthday a year ago? Or when she'd been crowned queen? Aletia distinctly remembered the bitter expression he'd worn during her coronation ceremony.

Aletia lapsed into thought. She'd spent more time with her uncle than with her actual parents. Though she'd never told anyone, her uncle felt more like a parent to her than her real parents. While her mother and father had spoiled her and given her anything she'd wanted, her uncle had actually scolded her at times and shown a genuine interest in raising her right.

Aletia thought back to the gentle smiles he'd used to give her. Now he didn't smile at all. It felt as though they were separated by a wall of ice.

Did I do something to make him mad? Did I fail him somehow?

No matter how hard she tried to start a conversation with him, all

he ever showed her was his back. Or some messenger or the other would show up to interrupt them. Worse, her mother, father, and even her advisors had been growing distant from her. As a result, she hadn't had a proper conversation with him in years.

And it wasn't just her uncle, either. Her subordinates, family, and even retainers refused to talk with her for any length of time. Her current solitude was an analogy for how isolated she'd become recently. A mixture of confusion and loneliness weighed down on her.

Her memories fast-forwarded a few years. The fragile peace that had settled upon Avatarl had begun to crack, and it was moments from shattering.

"Dear, sweet Aletia. This can't go on any longer. As queen, please make the right decision."

Aletia's mother and father pleaded with her. Their voices were gentle, but their expressions were full of fear. They were urging her to exile her beloved uncle, the prime minister.

In truth, Dienleed and his subordinates were rarely in the palace these days anyway. Instead, Aletia found herself surrounded by retainers and advisors from the previous king's era. Even Ubaldo had left her.

"He's too ambitious for his own good. We fear he may be planning a coup. Your life is in danger!"

"He's overstepped his authority far too many times. Your Majesty, it's clear he lusts for power. And he's already expanded his influence far too much. Please, you must do something."

"Exactly, Your Majesty. I understand your feelings, but we must act."

You understand my feelings!? As if! Aletia pushed down her anger and faced her retainers with the composed look of a queen.

I can't do it. I can't exile Uncle. Everyone around her agreed that her uncle was an ambitious, power-hungry, and dangerous man. But Aletia didn't believe it for a second. Even if it was true that her uncle was after the throne, she'd gladly hand it over to him. All she wanted was the opportunity to talk to him. She wanted to hear his voice again so badly. It didn't matter what he had to say, she just wanted to know how he truly felt.

In the end, however, she didn't get that chance until the very end. The fateful day where she was betrayed.

On that day, Aletia had been meeting with a messenger of the church. To her surprise, they'd wanted to afford her the title of divine oracle, a title whose authority rivaled the pope's. The gesture would be the first official overture of friendship between humans and the other races.

In the middle of such a joyous occasion, the doors to the audience

chamber were suddenly blown open, and following the explosion was a hail of magical bullets. The messengers from the church were incinerated in an instant. Once the barrage was over, Ubaldo and his imperial guards stepped in, fully armed. Without hesitation, they began slaughtering Aletia's attendants.

"U-Ubaldo! Stop this madness! That's an order!" Aletia roared, realizing how ridiculous she must have sounded. She knew what their actions meant, but her heart refused to accept it, which was precisely why despite being the strongest vampire alive, she allowed herself to be stabbed in the heart.

"I'll be relieving you of that throne."

"U-Uncle? Why..."

Her uncle stared down at her, close enough to be hugging her. Despite that, she couldn't make out his expression. However, she could tell that his hands were trembling. He pushed the blade deeper inside her chest, and Aletia's screams filled the audience chamber. That was just how furious Dietleed had been. Just how much he'd hated Aletia. That knowledge pierced her deeper than any blade could, and her heart froze.

"Uncle please, just talk to me!"

Even so, Aletia desperately tried to engage him in conversation.

"But our dear uncle never said a word, now did he?"

"Ah!"

Suddenly, the pain in Yue's chest felt far more real. Standing in front of her was not her uncle, but a grinning copy of herself. And stabbed through her chest was not a sword, but a spear of ice. The stage was the same as her traumatic past, and the only thing that had changed was the actors. The entire flashback Yue had witnessed had probably barely lasted a second in real life.

"You're so damn persistent!" Yue cursed, a rarity for her, and created a spatial tear around her. That sent her copy flying, and her automatic regeneration pushed the spear out of her chest. The copy righted itself in midair, using gravity magic to stop itself from slamming against the wall.

Behind Yue, Ubaldo and his men were busy slaughtering her mother, father, and friends. Sneering, her copy hurled more verbal abuse.

"Everyone else doubted Dietleed, but we chose to believe in him."

Yue ignored her copy's words and fired off a Void Shatter. Space warped all around her, blurring both her copy and the vision around her. It looked as though she was staring at the world through a cracked mirror. However, the vision didn't disappear. Furthermore, Yue's copy used its own spatial magic to protect itself against Yue's

Void Shatter.

“You were betrayed! *I* was betrayed!”

The copy screamed, its voice equal parts mirth and sadness. It danced to the side and unleashed its next attack. Numerous bullets of wind rushed toward Yue. At the same time, a storm of bullets surrounded Aletia in the vision. But while Yue wordlessly countered the assault, Aletia screamed in pain as they tore through her. The barrage continued, both in the past and in the present.

“You had so much faith in him. You believed in the bonds you had nurtured!”

Aletia flew across the room, directly between Yue and her copy. Though she kept receiving fatal wounds, her automatic regeneration saved her each time. However, her regeneration couldn't repair her shattered heart. Confused, wounded, and unwilling to accept reality, Aletia didn't even try to fight back. She slumped to the ground, the light gone from her eyes. She no longer had the will to go on.

What happens after was something Yue remembered well. She didn't need to see the scenes to recall those memories.

After she was defeated, Yue had been shackled. Her grief had caused her to lose consciousness, and when she'd awoken she'd been trapped in the abyss. From there, 300 years had passed. In that pitch-black prison, in the depths of despair, Yue had nurtured her hate. Continually.

“People betray others for their own benefit. That is an undeniable fact.”

The copy pointed to the figure of Aletia crawling pathetically across the ground. *Take a good look. Accept reality.*

“The man you love, your best friend, those you care for, all of them will betray you eventually.”

Hajime Nagumo, Shea, and all the others would inevitably betray Yue like her uncle had. That was the fear hidden deep within Yue's heart. That things like trust or bonds were all a sham. However—

“...Goodbye, dark past!”

A huge shockwave rippled across the vision. Golden mana swirled around Yue, spreading across the room. Yue then looked down at her past self crawling across the ground and stomped on her. The vision blurred, like a television getting a bad signal. It then faded away, placing Yue back in the room with the ice tree and ice mirrors.

She'd well and truly destroyed the vision this time.

“I suppose you won't budge after all. Then again, I guessed as much when I realized I was getting weaker.”

The copy seemed somewhat resigned. This particular trial was a test to see whether or not challengers could overcome their own negative emotions and past traumas. The more someone denied their

true feelings, the stronger their copy became. On the flip side, if they were able to accept their own weakness, their copy weakened. That was the basis of this trial. However, not once since the beginning of this trial had Yue's copy grown stronger. Meaning that not only had seeing her betrayal all over again failed to faze Yue, she hadn't doubted Hajime's love or Shea's friendship in the slightest.

"Hmph, of course! Everyone loves a mascot character like me!"

Yue proclaimed as she puffed out her chest proudly.

A painfully awkward silence followed her declaration. Yue looked away a little when she realized her copy wasn't going to even dignify that with a response. Sighing, the copy continued as if nothing had happened.

"Still, I weakened quite slowly, which is proof that you're still a little afraid of being betrayed."

The copy tried to wriggle its way into whatever small doubts Yue still had left. But while its scornful words rang true, Yue wasn't swayed.

"...So what? That betrayal is an important part of my life."

"What did you say?"

The copy shot Yue a confused look.

"After all, if I hadn't been betrayed, if I hadn't been sealed away in the abyss, I—"

—would never have met Hajime. Yue still remembered how much her uncle's betrayal had hurt. How much grief it had caused her. She'd despaired. She'd given in to hatred. She'd even resigned herself to her fate. Her imprisonment had been so agonizing that she'd wished for death. But so what?

"If it's only thanks to that betrayal that I was able to meet him, then even if I could do the past over, I would make the same choice every time. I'd go through that hell again. Even if I could turn back time and return to that day, I'd still do everything the same way."

Hajime had once said that to Yue. He'd been betrayed by his classmates, sent to the bottom of the abyss, and forced to suffer time and time again. But even so, he said he'd be willing to do it all over again in order to meet Yue. Yue giggled to herself as she thought back to that moment.

Her love for Hajime was so strong that she would be willing to accept him even if he betrayed her. Of course, she didn't doubt Hajime. But it wasn't trust that built the foundation of their relationship. Rather, it was an overwhelming love. Love strong enough to accept anything Hajime might do and to ensure he never escaped her grasp. Her will stemmed not from trust, but from desire.

In a way, Yue's love for Hajime was quite twisted. Under normal circumstances, a love like that might eventually lead to ruin. But her

partner was abnormal enough to accept Yue's overbearing love.

Yue's copy found itself incapable of denying her declaration. After all, it was a trial fabricated by the labyrinth, meaning it knew the true feelings of Yue's beloved, who had just overcome his own trial.

Hajime's love for Yue was an unhealthy dependence. And Yue's love for Hajime was too overbearing to be wholesome. They really were two peas in a pod. Sighing in exasperation, the copy looked up at the icy ceiling.

These two are well and truly insane. God, I just want to scream right now.

Both Hajime and Yue had been betrayed, and it had been at the lowest points of their respective lives that they'd met each other. A pure romance like the ones in fairy tales didn't suit the two of them in the slightest, which was why the copy knew it couldn't rattle Yue anymore by bringing up her betrayal or questioning her trust.

The match had been decided. Yue had overcome her trial. And like her beloved, she'd done it in a way the labyrinth hadn't planned for. She hadn't overcome the darkness in her heart, simply acknowledged its existence.

"It's time to end this..." Yue declared calmly. Her golden mana filled the room. She unleashed all five of her elemental dragons, using all the ancient magic at her disposal.

The weakened copy had no way out of Yue's unwavering assault. However, it hadn't given up. Its lips curled up in a faint smirk.

"I see. So the source of your strength is Hajime Nagumo."

Aletia was long gone. The fact that Yue had crushed her without hesitation was proof of that. That meant Yue's past couldn't shake her. But what about her future?

Even as Yue's dragons blasted through the magic her copy had summoned to defend itself, it wasn't fazed. It merely spoke calmly and said, "You're simply averting your eyes from the contradiction."

"Huh?"

"It never once occurred to you that maybe you *should* think about who and what you are, did it?"

"What are you...?"

"Do you really think you'll be able to stay by his side forever?"

"Huh...?" Yue's voice wavered just a little. Three of her dragons had been destroyed by her copy's counter and the two that had made it through missed, even though Yue should have had a clear shot. A little bit of the copy's lost power returned.

"Tch... I'll just crush you with force, then."

"Are you up to the task?"

The fight should have been decided, but it once again raged on.

Around the same time—

“Dieeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!”

“Gaaaaaaah!”

Ferocious yells echoed across a chamber identical to the one Yue was fighting in. A second later, someone screamed in pain. Shea stood in one corner of the room, Drucken on her shoulder. She remained alert as she watched her opponent, a black-haired, black-eared copy of herself, fly across the room like a pinball.

Unable to slow itself down at all, Shea’s copy slammed into the ice tree in the center of the room. There was a loud boom, and chunks of the tree trunk crumbled. Shea’s copy slid to the ground and fell to its knees. It was only by using its own Drucken that it managed to avoid collapsing entirely. The tree started to repair itself with a series of loud cracks, and the copy looked up at Shea. Glowing crimson eyes peeked out from behind its black bangs.

“Have you already forgotten the screams of your family? The pain they suffered just to keep *you* alive?”

A second later, Shea was thrown into a vivid flashback. Clouds of dust covered a barren wasteland.

“No! Stooooooooop!”

“It hurts! It hurts so much! Please, stop!”

“Run! Quickly!”

Screams, screams, and more screams filled Shea’s eardrums. Screams of pain, screams of sorrow, and screams of people telling Shea to keep running. Punctuating the screams was the sound of vulgar laughter and the pounding of countless hoofbeats. The sounds grew louder as the stampede of malice closed in on Shea and her family.

“Hahaha, time to hunt some rabbits.”

“Kill all the old ones! We don’t need ’em anyway!”

“We’re gonna sell half of them, so don’t rough ’em up too bad! The rest you can do whatever you want with!”

The imperial soldiers chasing down Shea’s tribe saw the rabbitmen as nothing more than playthings. The memories were still fresh in Shea’s mind. Even if she wasn’t being shown a flashback, she’d never forget what had happened.

“Hey, look at that pale girl!”

The soldiers whooped in excitement. They bared their fangs and started chasing down their next target. It was like they were hunting beasts.

“She’s mine! Don’t let her get away!”

The soldiers’ greedy eyes were trained on Shea. They cut down anyone in their way as if the members of Shea’s family were nothing but trash to them.

“Noooooooooooooooooooo! Stoooooooooop!”

This time, the scream belonged to Shea. She'd turned around and was trying to head back to the members of her family who were being trampled underfoot. However, Cam and the other rabbitmen nearby grabbed her and kept on running.

Again. It's all my fault again.

“That's right. It's all your fault,” Shea's copy taunted.

The imperial soldiers bearing down on Shea hefted their spears and—

“Fuck off!”

“Agh!”

Shea slammed her fist into the center of the soldiers' formation, and connected with her copy's face. The copy flew through the air, bounced off the ground a few times, then slid to a halt.

“Ngh, you really don't have any openings, do you!?”

Memories were just memories. Even if the labyrinth forced Shea to relive them, her focus was still entirely on the present. She knew better than to lose sight of her foe in the middle of battle. In fact—

“Your birth was a mist— Ah!?”

The copy tried to rile Shea up with more barbed comments, but it suddenly stopped and perked up its bunny ears. Then, without turning around, it leaped to the side. A second later, Drucken appeared where it had been standing.

“I'm gonna flatten you.”

Shea's cute voice didn't match the tremendous impact she caused with her hammer. A crater formed in the floor and cracks ran through the entire room. The copy landed lightly on its feet and looked over at the crater Shea had made.

“What!?”

But there was no one there. The copy shouldered its hammer and turned around, only to see Shea standing behind it. As unbelievable as it seemed, it had lost sight of Shea for a moment.



“How’re you so fast!?”

“You’re just too slow!”

The copy shivered in fear. There was another boom as Shea’s hammer accelerated past the speed of sound. The copy barely had time to bring its own black Drucken up to block. The impact alone released a shockwave powerful enough to end the fight, and the copy was sent flying. It crashed into the ice mirror wall at the far end of the room with enough force to drive the air out of its lungs. But it knew it had no time to rest, and fired a shotgun blast sideways, hoping to use the recoil to escape Shea’s follow-up attack.

“Take thiiiiiii!”

Shea kned the wall with such force that she created another crater.

“Everything happened because you were born! It’s all your fault!”

This is impossible! But despite the fact that the copy could see no possible avenue to victory, it continued to carry out its duty. It had every one of Shea’s combat tactics at its disposal, as well as the knowledge of what words would hurt her the most.

“Because of you, your family had to live in hiding!”

A barrage of iron balls hurtled toward the copy. Shea had just thrown them, but they had the speed of cannonballs. The copy just barely managed to dodge them and was forced to deflect a few with Drucken. Determined, it once again tried to stir up the darkness inside Shea’s heart.

“Even the other rabbitmen tribes abandoned you!”

It was true that only the Haulia had ever cared for Shea. The other rabbitmen would have turned her in had they known about her. That had forced the Haulia tribe into isolation, and they hadn’t even been able to trade with the other tribes. As a result, they’d had a hard time even scraping by. They’d needed to get all of their food and other necessities by themselves, without relying on others. All because Shea had been born with mana. From that moment onward, the Haulia had been treated as outcasts. Of the Haulia, it had been Cam who’d suffered the most. Shea knew better than anyone what he’d gone through to raise her.

Finally seeing an opportunity to counterattack, the copy fired off a barrage of explosive slugs at Shea. She brought Drucken up and blocked the assault with the hammer’s face. Once again, the copy dragged her into a flashback. This time she was seeing a memory of when another rabbitman tribe had come to the Haulia village. They’d come to convince Cam to rethink his policy of isolation.

“Chief of the Haulia! You can’t keep going like this!”

“Us rabbitmen are already the weakest race there is! Shouldn’t we

at least work together to survive in this world?"

"Don't you understand? You Haulia are making it harder for the rest of us rabbitmen to get by too!"

A young Shea watched the argument from her hiding place inside a small wooden crate. Even though everything the other rabbitmen were saying was correct, Cam didn't budge an inch.

"I'm sorry. If you need help with anything, you can ask us. But we would prefer not to trade with others. That's just how the Haulia are."

Though his expression was pained, Cam's resolve was firm. He didn't waver even when the other rabbitmen pelted him with insults. Throughout the meeting, the only thing Cam did was lower his head apologetically. In the end, the other rabbitmen left in a rage, even though they should have all been allies. It was on that day that Shea started to feel guilty that she was alive. It was also on that day that she realized she needed to hide from the rest of the world.

"We were the only irregular beastmen in all of Haltina! Even our family wasn't like us!" the copy shouted.

"We should have just run away on our own! Left our family behind! At least that way they wouldn't have died for us! This all happened because we were weak! Weak of body, and weak of mind. If only—"

"Shut the fuck uuuuuup!"

Shea stomped on the ground with such force that the ice beneath her rose up to form a shield. The ice wall blocked the copy's next barrage of explosive slugs. After the shockwaves died down, Shea punched the wall in front of her, blowing it apart. Shards of ice shot forward, blowing a hole through the copy's third wave of explosive slugs. Then, she instantly dashed through the opening and threw Drucken at her copy. She closed the rest of the distance between them while the copy was busy dodging. Panicking, the copy tried to blow Shea back with a concentrated salvo of explosive slugs.

"Shea-style defensive maneuver, Power Through!"

"That can hardly be called a maneuver."

The copy was right, but unfortunately for it, that didn't matter. Shea crossed her arms in an x-shape in front of her chest and dashed through the barrage. She improved her already insane body strengthening by enhancing it with evolution magic. As a result, the explosive slugs barely even bruised her skin as they exploded. She had quite literally just powered through. And once she was through, it was her turn to go on the offensive.

"Haaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah! Die!"

Shea fired off a right straight at her copy. It blocked with Drucken, but it wasn't able to absorb the impact of the blow and was sent flying. As it flew through the air, it heard the jangling of chains.

“Oh shi—”

Before it could finish that thought, Shea’s left arm finished its rotation. In her hand was Drucken’s handle, still attached to the hammer via chain. The chain wrapped around the giant tree in the center, adding even more centrifugal force to the hammer’s rotation. The copy barely had time to register what was happening before Drucken slammed into it.

The force of the blow caused it to change trajectory in midair, sending it sideways instead of backward. Unable to break its fall, the copy slammed into the wall again. Tiny crystals of ice flew through the air, sparkling in the dim light. Within that glittering cloud, there were also sparkling particles which weren’t ice.

“Ahaha... Looks like I’ve lost.”

The copy smiled sadly to itself. It was cradling its shoulder, and parts of it were starting to disintegrate.

“So you’re finally at your limit.”

“Yeah, I’m no match for you.”

Shea had even healed the slight damage her copy’s barrage had inflicted on her via restoration magic. The copy shook its head in amazement.

“You really weren’t fazed at all. Even though everything I said should have been our true feelings...”

Shea hadn’t faltered in the slightest. In fact, the more the copy had tried to torment Shea, the weaker it had gotten. It hadn’t been much of a trial. Shea looked down at the copy and shook her head in exasperation.

“What are you talking about? You can’t change the past. All you can do is carry it with you. But even if the past is still with me, I swore that I’d do everything in my power to make the future better.”

On that day when Shea had been chased, watched her family get murdered, and then chased again, she’d seen the future. In the depths of despair, in the abyss of grief, she’d seen a future full of hope. Hope in the form of Hajime and Yue. It was then that she’d told herself not to give up, to keep running forward. She’d done everything in her power to reach out and grasp the future that lay together with those two.

“I swore that I’d become someone who could protect the people I love from those who’d try to take them from me, remember?”

That had been Mona’s—Shea’s mother’s—wish. And Shea had inherited that will. Tired of being weak, Shea had pushed herself to become strong. As a result—

“I made my peace with all that suffering ages ago.”

Shea reeled Drucken back into her hands and slung it over her shoulder. She looked just like the Grand Tree. Firm and strong, but

also flexible.

“The darkness in people’s hearts is supposed to be strong enough that it paralyzes them even then.”

It wasn’t easy to free oneself from the darkness lurking within them. And yet, Shea had.

“You might be me, but it looks like you don’t really get me. I guess that’s proof that the labyrinth’s mixed in with you somewhere. Otherwise, you would have known from the start that your words couldn’t hurt me.”

The wounds in Shea’s heart hadn’t healed. She’d never forget the day she lost so many members of her family. And no matter what anyone else said, she knew for a fact that the whole ordeal had been her fault. But she was done moping and crying about it. She’d resolved to throw away her weakness and stop running from conflict. Nothing could stop her anymore. She’d keep going toward the future she desired.

Why? Well that’s obvious. Her family had worked so hard to protect her. Even though they were members of the weakest race, they’d weathered scorn and derision just to raise her. Her father and mother had endured so much to keep her alive.

Her life was precious to her precisely because of what others had done to protect it. And now she’d found so many other things precious to her. Someone who cherished her and accepted her love wholeheartedly. A best friend she could trust and confide in. So many others whom she cared about and who cared about her. This time, she’d be the one to protect them all.

“The darkness in my heart? Hah. Sorry, but I’m not some tragic heroine.”

Shea knew she was blessed. There were people she wanted to protect, and those people wanted to protect her back. She could say with confidence that she was happy. Which was why she was the one who’d never forgive herself if she started acting like some unfortunate damsel. Sure, maybe she might have entertained those feelings for a fleeting moment, but that wasn’t nearly enough to weaken her resolve.

“Listen up and listen well.”

Shea grinned fearlessly and pointed Drucken at her copy. She straightened her back, confidence oozing from every pore. Even her copy couldn’t help but be amazed by how beautiful she looked. Then, she puffed her chest out proudly and declared, “Right now, I’m invincible. It doesn’t matter who I’m up against, I won’t lose!”

Her words rang true. The copy felt itself grow even weaker. Words had the power both to bolster people and to weaken them. Shea had proven that this trial could be overcome through strength of body and

mind alone. She'd tackled it head-on and come out victorious.

The labyrinth had no choice but to accept the strength of this challenger. Shea's copy smiled faintly at her.

"I see. This trial pushes you to overcome yourself, but you'd already done that long ago."

"That's right. Anyway, my friends are waiting for me, so you better let me through!"

"Fufu, you haven't gotten past me yet! Let's see if you can take my final attack!"

Twin pillars of mana, one sky blue the other dark crimson, rose into the sky. Shea and her copy shot forward at the same time, leaving craters in their wake. They'd gone from zero to max speed in a single step. Both of them then used the recoil from Drucken's shotgun blasts to speed up even further.

Wisps of mana trailed behind the two of them, making them look like shooting stars. Shea narrowed her focus to the enemy in front of her, and the rest of the world faded away. She brought Drucken back, ready to swing at a moment's notice. Still hurtling forward, she spun around once. Then, with all the force of her charge behind her, Shea swung. Sonic booms trailed behind the swing as it accelerated past the speed of sound.

The copy mimicked her movements exactly, so the black and gray hammers collided with unbelievable force. The collision caused a deafening boom. Shockwaves spread out from the point of impact, blasting the nearby ground and walls. A massive crater formed in the ground, as if Yue had just cast gravity magic on it. Of the two combatants, the only one still standing was—

"Impressive."

Shea.

The copy smiled slightly as it praised her skills. It then disintegrated into a mass of shimmering particles and vanished. Shea stood there silently for a few seconds, then sighed in relief. The shotgun shells she'd spent to accelerate herself clattered to the ground.

Shea looked up at the ceiling and muttered, "Mom. I want to become a kind monster."

Once in the past, Shea had come to her mother crying about how she was a monster. Back then, Mona had said, "It doesn't matter what other people say. You are who you want to be. You have the power to be anything you choose."

This isn't enough. I need to get even stronger. I'm gonna get so strong that I can protect everyone from anything. I'm gonna become a kind monster. It was this determination that had propelled Shea this far.

What would Mom think if she saw me now?

"Be proud of yourself. Hold your head high and tell the world 'I'm

Shea Haulia! You got a problem with that!?”

Shea smiled as she remembered her mom’s words. Following her advice, Shea held her head high and said, “I’m Shea Haulia. You got a problem with that?”

In the silence that followed, Shea felt as though she heard her mother’s voice.

“You’ve grown into a splendid monster, Shea.”

Her bunny ears twitched slightly. Then, as if even the labyrinth was blessing her, a tunnel opened in the wall directly across from her. Shea shouldered Drucken and walked into it without hesitation.

After five minutes of jogging down the dimly lit ice tunnel, Shea’s ears perked up. There was movement up ahead. She smiled, recognizing the sound of those footsteps.

Past the next bend in the tunnel was a dead end. But Shea’s best friend, whose footsteps she’d just picked up on, was past that dead end. Meaning whatever wall was in Shea’s way was about to be pulverized. Her tendencies had gotten rather violent recently, but as far as Shea was concerned charging ahead at full speed was the only option around. After all, the self-proclaimed strongest fighter had nothing to fear.

“Obstacles are meant to be crushed!”

Shea went from a jog to a sprint in the span of a single step, confident that another path existed past what seemed to be a dead-end. She raised Drucken high and swung with all her might.

“Uryaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah— Wha!?”

Just before her hammer impacted, the wall of ice in front of her disappeared. Drucken swung through empty air, leaving Shea off-balance as she tumbled forward. She almost faceplanted into the ice, but managed to turn her fall into a roll at the last second. She then leaped to her feet and raised her hands in the air, as if the earlier acrobatic maneuver had been entirely on purpose. Her slightly flushed cheeks made it obvious that it hadn’t though, and that she was embarrassed about her blunder. Still, she smiled in an attempt to convince everyone watching that she’d meant to do that.

“Y-Yue-san. It’s not what you think! I did that on purpose!”

Shea glanced around, looking for her friend. Her acute sense of hearing had told her earlier that she was here somewhere. Shea was worried Yue would make fun of her clumsiness, but she realized soon enough there was no worry of that happening. Yue was certainly here, but she wasn’t looking at Shea. Nor had she been paying attention when Shea called her name.

“Yue-san?”

Shea called out to her again, but there was no response. Yue stood

silently in front of the ice tree in the center, not even bothering to look over her shoulder. Shea had no way of telling what kind of face Yue was making. But she felt as though she shouldn't get any closer.

For a moment, Shea worried that Yue might have failed her trial, but a second later that worry was erased. Upon closer inspection, Shea realized that there were two other paths leading out of this room. The one Yue must have come in through, and another one leading somewhere else. Her copy was nowhere to be seen. Proof that Yue had indeed completed her trial. Thinking that Yue probably just hadn't heard her, Shea walked over to the center of the room. It was then that she noticed.

"Huh?"

To her utter disbelief, Yue looked badly beaten up. Of course, thanks to her automatic regeneration, Yue had no physical wounds, but her shredded clothes and accessories made it clear that she'd just been through an exhausting fight. Yue's opponent had naturally been a copy of herself. Unlike Shea's fight, which had been a battle of pure strength, Yue's fight had been a magical war.

Furthermore, Yue's preferred combat style was to let enemy attacks hit her and let her automatic regeneration take care of the damage while she concentrated solely on firing back with even more powerful attacks. It stood to reason that she wouldn't come out unscathed. However, now that the fight was over, Yue should have restored her clothes with restoration magic. In retrospect, Shea realized it was strange for Yue to just be standing there instead of advancing forward too.

Unsure what was wrong with her best friend, Shea hesitated to get any closer. But a second later she shook off that hesitation and shouted cheerfully, "Yue-san!"

"Ah—"

Twitching in surprise, Yue looked over her shoulder. She saw Shea's radiant smile and narrowed her eyes against its dazzling light.

"Shea..."

"That's right, Yue-san. It's me."

Shea chuckled lightly, and Yue finally let herself smile a little. Her shoulders slumped, and she relaxed her previously tense muscles.

"Our rooms were connected?"

"Looks like it. I followed the path that showed up after beating my trial and it brought me here. Looks like you beat yours too, Yue."

Shea didn't bother mentioning Yue's ripped clothes and instead turned to the passage leading forward.

"Mmm... It was a piece of cake."

It was at that moment that Yue finally realized what state her clothes were in. Realizing that Shea looked completely unhurt, she

blushed in embarrassment and quickly cast restoration magic on herself. Shea watched Yue's clothes stitch back together and wondered whether or not it was okay to ask about her trial. There was no way Yue had faltered, or she wouldn't have cleared her trial. But at the same time, it was clear Yue was still worrying about something. Enough that she'd forgotten to fix her clothes and hadn't even noticed Shea the first time she'd called out to her.

What happened? Yue-san didn't look like she was being affected by the whispers that much. And I don't think anything anyone says could make her doubt her relationship with Hajime-san or the rest of us. From what I can tell, the darkness in Yue's heart has to do with her betrayal 300 years ago... but I feel like she's not the kind of person to let that drag her down at this point. What should I say to her though? Should I ask her what she's thinking? Or should I just be here for her until she works her way through it? Shea agonized over how best to help her best friend.

"Shea, I'm fine... Let's keep going."

Sensing Shea's distress, Yue smiled at her.

"Yue-san... Yeah, you're right. Let's go find Hajime-san and the others!"

"Mmm... I want to see Hajime again."

"Fufu, same here!"

Shea knew Yue was just trying to look strong for her, and that caused her bunny ears to wilt in worry. But at the same time, she knew there was no point in waiting around. Besides, meeting up with Hajime so that Yue could flirt with him was probably the best way to cheer her up. Shea pulled herself together, and her rabbit ears perked back up. She strode forward, a new spring in her step. Yue followed after her, and the two entered the newly-opened ice tunnel.

"Do you think everyone's okay? They looked like they weren't doing too good when the whispers started coming, but..."

"Mmm... Good point. Shizuku and the hero especially."

"I was surprised Shizuku-san was having such a hard time. She was always so calm and composed when we were in Haltina's labyrinth... but Kaori-san was really worried about her here."

"Shirasucky has problems, so she's probably having an even harder time than Shizuku."

"There you go again! Yue-san, you really like Kaori-san, don't you?"

"I do not..."

The two of them chatted idly as they made their way through the tunnel. As always, Shea was the one who brought up topics, and Yue simply responded. But that was just the dynamic the two of them had.

Yue's answers were clear and concise, and occasionally she'd even make jokes. However, there was just a slight hint of unease that

layered all of her actions. Shea could tell. Despite keeping up with the conversation, Yue's mind was on something else. Something that was making her act just a tad more distant than usual.

In truth, Yue was still thinking about the battle she'd had with her copy.

"Do you really think you'll be able to stay by his side forever?"

After asking that question, Yue's copy had regained much of its strength. Yue's overwhelming advantage had slowly been eroded away.

"Don't be stupid..."

Yue had refuted her copy's words and tried to force her way through with gravity magic. But even as her copy had been forced to its knees by the power of her magic, it had continued asking her cutting questions.

"Think about it. Why are you even alive right now?"

That's obvious. Because Hajime saved me. Guessing Yue's response, the copy had needled her even further.

"Don't you get what I'm saying here? Fine, let me rephrase the question. Why didn't Uncle kill us?"

Yue had thought nothing the copy said could hurt her anymore. That she'd be able to force her way to victory. And yet, Yue found herself unable to ignore that question. It cut through her heart as sharply as any blade. Though she didn't know it, her gravity magic was getting weaker.

"You should know best of all. Your immortality isn't perfect. It wouldn't have been impossible for him to kill you."

The copy had been right. Yue's automatic regeneration, the cornerstone that supported her immortality, required mana to use. Once her mana was drained, Yue could no longer regenerate. That day, when she'd been mercilessly struck down time and time again, she'd been almost completely drained of mana. Killing her then would have been possible. Dienleed had been more than capable of doing the deed.

The only reason Yue hadn't asked that question before was because 300 years of imprisonment had taken its toll on her. The overwhelming despair, unending solitude, and pitch-black darkness had twisted her emotions until nothing but hatred and anger remained. She'd convinced herself that her uncle simply hadn't been able to kill her, and discarded any other possibilities in order to further fuel her hate.

"He... never planned on killing me... from the very start?" Yue muttered quietly as the realization washed over her.

"That's right. He'd *wanted* to seal you away."

Why? Why? WHY? Yue's heart hammered in her chest. If his goal had simply been to usurp the throne, why had he let a liability like Yue live? The question circled around inside Yue's mind.

There was a huge burst of wind, and the copy pushed aside the last vestiges of Yue's gravity magic. It then counterattacked with a barrage of Onyx Blasts.

"Ugh..."

Yue was unable to neutralize them all, and one hit her in the shoulder. That single hit was enough to send Yue flying through the air like a ragdoll. Her mental anguish combined with the physical damage caused her concentration to slip, and she returned to the world of flashbacks. But this flashback was different from the ones before it. Until now, the memories she'd seen were ones she could have recalled on her own, if she so chose to. This was a fragment of a memory she herself had buried deep inside her heart and completely forgotten over her long years of confinement.

"I'm so sor— But there's no other— One day— someone you can — Will surely— protect— This is all— But please, forget— Love—"

Snippets of conversation reached Yue's ear as she sped down memory lane. The voice was familiar and kind, but also filled with sadness and regret. It was her uncle, Dienleed's voice.

The memory was fuzzy, and it was hard to hear over the static. Yue couldn't clearly make out Dienleed's expression or his words. But she knew that she was in the room where she'd been sealed. As her consciousness had been hazy at the time she'd heard this conversation, her own memories of it weren't perfect either.

There was one thing that she remembered distinctly, though. Something soft caressing her cheek. Even though he'd betrayed her, even though he'd sealed her here, her uncle's hand had been exceedingly gentle. It had been similar to the way Hajime caressed her now. His touch had been that of a father who adored his daughter.

"But what about your real parents?"

Yue snapped back to her senses just in time to see that she was surrounded by five elemental dragons, all of them emitting dark crimson sparks. She quickly used Heavensfall and Spatial Severance to shoot down a few of the dragons, then attempted to block the rest with a barrier. However her copy was clearly getting stronger, and she was unable to deflect all of the dragons.

The wind dragon made it through and sliced through her flank. While Yue's automatic regeneration healed the wound instantly, her clothes were shredded. And she no longer had the leeway to restore them with restoration magic. Instead, she summoned her own five dragons and had them face off against her copy's.

"What did you do to me?"

Yue shouldn't have had that memory. *That can't be real.*

She glared at her copy, but it just shook its head.

"What you don't know, I don't know. All I can do is force you to see things you know but pretend not to."

"So then..."

"For example, what about our real father? We loved Uncle as if he were our real father, but what kind of person was our real father?"

"What are you...?"

Naturally, he'd loved Yue. And he'd been mercilessly cut down by her uncle. But though Yue wanted to say that, she couldn't. Because that memory wasn't there inside of her. No matter how hard Yue searched the annals of her brain, all she found were vague, indistinct recollections.

It wasn't that she'd forgotten her parents, but rather that over 300 years, none of those memories had been impressionable enough to last. And that realization disgusted Yue.

"You know. You understand best of all. Just how your mother and father thought of you."

The ten dragons canceled each other out, and Yue and her copy started firing magical barrages at each other. All the while, her copy continued scraping through her memories.

"Aletia, you're such a wonderful girl."

"If there's anything you want, we'll get it for you."

"We'll make sure everything's perfect for you."

Yue's parents had never once scolded her. In fact, they'd never even considered it possible. Her father and mother had done anything and everything she'd asked. One could say she'd been raised in a caring environment, but was that really how parents should act toward their children? It felt less as though they loved her, and more as though they worshiped her. The only person who'd ever scolded Yue had been her uncle. He was the one who'd taught her what it meant to be royalty, and what was important for people to hold dear.

"Brother, you can't keep doing this! Don't you realize what that girl is?"

Yue suddenly remembered how her uncle and her father had always argued about her.

"The church is asking for a meeting? Again? No, it's fine, Aletia. I'll take care of it."

She remembered how her uncle had always been present for every meeting she'd had with church officials. And the only time she'd met with them at all had been when he couldn't get rid of them himself. At the time, Yue had gotten angry at him for being so overprotective.

"You still remember, don't you?"

Once again, Yue snapped back to the present. She was being

trapped by her memories more and more often. A blast of spatial magic tore the space around her. Yue only just managed to avoid being cut in half, but she wasn't safe yet.

"How Uncle looked when he first started putting distance between you and him?"

Irritation swept over Yue at those words. Her memories resurfaced, and her uncle's face popped into her head. Though he'd tried his best to look expressionless, a hint of anguish had shone through on his face. His eyes had looked tortured as if he was struggling with some unspeakable suffering. At that moment, his wrinkles had seemed to deepen, aging him by decades in the span of an instant.

"Ah..."

Another one of the copy's attacks landed. Blood and scraps of cloth flew through the air as the magical bullet cut through Yue's leg along with the end of her coat. The copy had regained its former strength and was just as powerful as Yue. It was only after seeing its strength that Yue realized just how shaken she was.

"If you hadn't had someone to hate, if you hadn't thrown away all hope and given up on thinking, you wouldn't have been able to bear the pain. You'd taken the most logical conclusion at face value and convinced yourself it had to be the truth."

Yue couldn't deny it. *Did I...alter my own memories?*

For the first time, Yue began to consider the possibility that the truth was different than what she remembered. At the same time, her initial question rose to the forefront of her mind.

Why did he seal me away? Because of my special magic? No, I already know that can't have been it. Was it just one final act of pity? No, confining me in an eternal prison of darkness was far crueler than killing me outright. Then did he hate me? No, I've already remembered that isn't it. Though Yue wasn't aware of it, there was a logical answer.

Was there something about me I didn't realize? Was something after me because of that? Was that why Uncle sealed me? Does that mean whatever was after me before is still here?

Endless questions presented themselves one after another. As Yue was deliberating, her copy asked one last, biting question.

"Who are we? *What* are we?"

"Ah—"

Yue couldn't answer. Because that answer would reveal the reason why she'd been sealed in the first place. And Yue did not doubt that whatever that reason had been, it was still alive. Yue felt as though a lump of ice had settled in her stomach. Her entire body felt unnaturally cold.

She stopped moving, and her copy's barrage of magic caught up to

her. Rather than guard against it, she let herself be blown away. She skid across the ground, came to a stop, and somehow got back to her feet. Like always, her body was unscathed. But her clothes were ruined. Her precious white coat was a ripped mess and covered in blood.

Her copy walked up to her and said once more, "It never once occurred to you that maybe you *should* think about who and what you are, did it?"

This time, the words that followed served as a finishing blow.

"Do you really think you'll be able to stay by his side forever?"

Defeated, Yue was unable to respond with a definitive "yes." She could easily imagine that the thing she'd escaped in the past would find her once again in her future. And that thought terrified her. For the first time in ages, Yue just wanted to curl up in a ball and cry.

To Yue, Hajime was the light. He'd cut through the darkness, illuminated her world, and given her warmth, kindness, and happiness. Being cut off from that would be the same as being dead. Yue's copy gradually drew closer. Every footstep brought Yue one step closer to death. She looked up at the icy ceiling. Her crimson eyes stared back at her. They were the same color as Hajime's mana, the color she loved so much. A second later, a smile spread across her face.

"....."

The copy came to a halt. A shadow of hesitation flitted across its face. Yue looked back down at it and said quietly, "Even if I disappear, he won't be alone."

"No, you—"

"Hajime has Shea... And Tio. And even though I hate to admit it, Kaori."

The copy stared blankly at Yue, its mouth still half-open. But a moment later, it realized what Yue was trying to say. It stared down at itself in utter disbelief. It could tell what was happening to its power.

"In the end, Hajime Nagumo really is the center of your world, huh?"

"Of course..."

The copy wasn't getting any weaker. But it wasn't getting any stronger either. So, though Yue had been brought face to face with a shocking revelation, her resolve remained firm. It had been shaken for a moment, but now it was renewed.

"You two really are birds of a feather."

The copy's tone changed. Faced with the vampire princess' overwhelming love, it no longer saw any need to copy Yue's speech style. Instead, it looked up wearily and recalled how Hajime, too, had bragged about his love for Yue while overcoming his own trial.

“I’m done questioning myself...”

“So it seems. I’m out of memories to revive as well.”

Their power was equal. The copy had no more memories to dredge up. Both sides gathered all of their mana. They poured everything they had into one final attack, Draconic Thunder. Two dragons, one wreathed in golden thunder while the other was wreathed in crimson, crashed into each other.

“Regardless of what the future holds, if I lose here, I’ll never see Hajime again! So get lost!”

“Ah!”

Between the two, it was Yue’s dragon that was winning. After a fierce struggle, it opened its maw wide and swallowed the copy’s dragon whole. Then, it moved on to swallow the copy as well.

As it disappeared, Yue’s copy watched Yue with an exasperated, and slightly worried, smile. With one final roar, Yue’s thunder dragon vanished, and with it, her copy. Part of the ice wall crumbled away, revealing a new path. However, Yue didn’t even look at it. She tottered unsteadily to the ice tree in the center of the room and stared at her reflection. Her resolve was as firm as always. But this fight had put new doubts in her mind.

The vague unease they espoused spread through her heart like a faint haze, obscuring her thoughts. She desperately sifted through her memories, searching for a solution to her worries. If her copy hadn’t been able to provide an answer though, it meant that she just didn’t know. After all, everything it knew, she knew.

But even so, Yue couldn’t help but search her memories. She felt compelled to. If there really was something her uncle had tried to protect her from in the past, and if that something was destined to find her in the future, then she needed to—

“Yue-san!”

“Ah, Shea?”

Yue felt a strong hand on her shoulder and snapped out of her reverie. She looked up and saw Shea staring at her with a worried expression on her face. Shea’s sky-blue eyes met Yue’s, and Yue could see just how seriously Shea was worried about her. It seemed she’d been so deep in her memories that she’d spaced out. Past Shea, the path they were walking down came to a dead end. Yue hadn’t even noticed that. Realizing she’d failed to hide how shaken she was, Yue looked down guiltily.

“Please, Yue-san. Tell me what happened.”

Shea’s voice was quiet but sharp. She took her hands off Yue’s shoulders and grabbed her hands instead. Shea’s hands were warm and reassuring, reminding Yue that she wasn’t alone.

“.....”

But even so, Yue couldn't bring herself to speak. She didn't know how to say what she wanted to say, or if she should say it at all. Her worries for the future were vague and unclear. She didn't know how to explain them, and when she realized how vague they were she suddenly felt embarrassed about putting words to them. Yue took pride in being an older sister figure to Shea.

Unfortunately for Yue, all of her hesitation strengthened Shea's desire to know what was bothering her best friend. Shea no longer felt as though she could wait leisurely until Yue was ready to talk. Her sharp gaze made it clear that she was going to get the truth out of Yue one way or another. Realizing that she couldn't deceive Shea any longer, Yue sighed. But even if she was resigned to explain herself, she still didn't know how to articulate her worries.

“I'm sorry, Shea... I haven't really sorted out my feelings myself.”

“So you can't talk about what's bothering you?”

“Mmm... My fake said a lot of stuff about my past to me... Of course, that didn't change my feelings about you or Hajime so I could clear the trial, but...I realized I might be remembering some things wrong. I want to sort everything out before I explain, so can you wait a little?”

“I see...”

Shea still wasn't satisfied. And she showed no signs of letting go of Yue's hands. Seeing how stubborn Shea was being, Yue smiled. Her smile was filled with love and trust for her best friend. *You've grown strong, Shea.*

When they'd first met, Shea had been a crybaby and a scaredy-cat. A worthless rabbit who'd clung to Yue and Hajime for dear life. But she'd worked hard. Harder than anyone else. No matter how much she'd cried, no matter how pathetic she'd looked covered in mud and blood, she hadn't once given up. Before Yue knew it, Shea'd grown so strong that she was the one protecting her. Shea's cheerful, straightforward nature had saved Yue more times than she could count.

I guess it's not fair to keep thinking of you as a little sister, huh...? Yue extricated her hands from Shea's and then grabbed them from the outside. She imparted her warmth to Shea, the same way she had moments before.

“Yue-san?”

Shea gave her a confused look. Yue looked up at her and chuckled. The indistinct fear that had settled within Yue's heart had disappeared. In its place burned a powerful resolve. Yue's expression grew resolute and she said, “Shea...”

“Yeah, what is it, Yue-san?”

Shea's expression grew even more worried, but Yue didn't flinch from her gaze. Her ruby-red eyes were filled with trust for her best friend.

"If... something happens to me, take care of Hajime for me."

"....."

Shea was speechless. Her eyes opened wide, and she stared at Yue, dumbfounded. Her reaction was only natural. This was the last thing she'd expected Yue to say. Still, Yue was confident Shea would smile reassuringly and say, "Of course, you can count on me!" However—

"Are you fucking kidding me?"

"Huh?"

To Yue's surprise, Shea's voice was stone cold. Her expression turned flat, emotionless. But it seemed as though she was forcing herself to push down her emotions and look stoic. Yue was so surprised by Shea's reaction that for a moment she forgot to breathe. But a moment later she renewed her resolve. Yue wasn't joking about this. There was no one else she trusted enough to tell. And she needed Shea to accept her request.

"I'm not... I'm saying this because I'm resolved."

"You're resolved?"

Shea grit her teeth together and narrowed her eyes. Despite Shea's withering glare, Yue didn't shy away. Unable to keep her emotions in check, Shea's facade of emotionlessness crumbled. *Smack!* A loud noise echoed through the tunnel.

"Ah!?"

Before Yue had any time to react, Shea slapped her. Or rather, Yue was so surprised that she couldn't react. Never in her wildest dreams had Yue considered that Shea would respond to a heartfelt plea like this. Though Shea hadn't used body strengthening to increase the force of her slap, she hadn't held back either. Blinking in disbelief, Yue raised a hand to her cheek.

"Shea?"

"Please take that back."

"....."

"Take back that crap about how you want me to take care of Hajime-san if something happens to you right now!"

Shea's face trembled in rage. She was seconds away from losing it completely. Yue's eyes narrowed, her disbelief replaced with anger.

"Are you saying my resolve, my faith in you is just crap?"

"That's exactly what I'm saying."

Shea's sky-blue eyes stared deeply into Yue's deep crimson ones. Both of them knew that neither of them would budge an inch. *Why?* Yue thought to herself. *Why is she so mad? Why won't she accept my trust in her?* Sadness mingled with the anger burgeoning in Yue's

heart.

At the same time, Shea also thought, *Why? Why would you say something so sad?* Shea and Yue glared silently at each other for a few minutes. Had anyone else in the party been present, they would have been dumbfounded. Shea and Yue were so close that no one would expect them to seriously get mad at each other.

The first to make a move was Shea. She leaped back and hefted Drucken, resting it atop her shoulder.

"It looks like words won't convince you. I don't know what that fake told you, but it's pretty sad seeing the strongest vampire in the world reduced to this pathetic state. I guess I have to beat the cowardice out of you."

A spiral of light blue mana erupted skyward from Shea. Yue, who hadn't been prepared for an actual fight, looked taken aback.

"Shea... Wait—"

Her words were interrupted by a full-power swing from Shea. Yue hurriedly backstepped, just barely avoiding Drucken. The ground where she'd been standing on exploded. Shards of ice shot everywhere as a massive crater formed in the floor. Though the ground instantly began to regenerate, the force of the blow proved that Shea was serious.

"Shea... You're taking this joke too far."

"Joke? Are you still half-asleep or something? Since you don't seem to get it I'll spell it out for you. I'm dead serious. Yue-san, unless you take back that crap you just said... I'm seriously gonna beat you up."

"Shea... Why?"

"You seriously don't understand? Unbelievable! The usual Yue-san, the Yue-san I know would *never* act so weak! Wake up damnniiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiit!"

Shea once again swung Drucken with all her might. It accelerated past the sound barrier, pushing a film of white in front of it. Yue used gravity magic to fall backward, just barely avoiding the hammer. Shea's horizontal swing missed, and Drucken crashed into the wall, shattering it.

Heedless of the damage she was causing, Shea fired off a series of swings. Each one possessed as much destructive force as a falling meteor. To make matters worse, the passageway was quite narrow. There was nowhere to run, and close-quarters combat had never been Yue's specialty. It was only a matter of time before she was trapped. However, Yue was more annoyed than she was afraid of being cornered.

"Cut it out already... Do you realize how much courage it took to gather this resolve!?"

Yue walked into the storm of swings and cast Heavensfall. Gravity drove Drucken towards the floor, altering the trajectory of Shea's swing. Yue then leaped off the hammer, which was stuck to the ground, flipped around in midair, and then cast Crystal Coffin directly above Shea. By the time she'd landed behind the bunny girl, Shea's thighs were encased in ice. It reminded Shea of the time she'd trained with Yue to earn her right to join Hajime's party. Back then, the same Crystal Coffin had been powerful enough to trap her in ice instantly, leaving her a sobbing mess.

"You call this resolve!? Raaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

But now, such a spell wasn't enough to even slow her down. All it took was a single attack. Shea punched the ground, shattering the nearby floor along with the Crystal Coffin. Her fist packed more of a punch than a cannonball. Yue stumbled from the shockwaves sent out by Shea's punch, a look of disbelief on her face. She was certain she'd put enough mana into the spell, yet Shea had shattered it easily. With a very unwomanly grunt, Shea lifted Drucken with brute force, fighting against the massive amount of gravity pressing down on it. She then pressed a trigger on the handle, transforming it into bombardment mode. Without hesitation, she fired a barrage of shotgun shells at Yue. The corridor was too narrow, leaving no room to dodge. Yue had no choice but to put up a barrier. A hail of exploding slugs slammed into the barrier, spreading shockwaves across its surface. For a moment, the corridor was filled with ripples of blue mana.

"Shea! Cut it out al—"

"That's my line, Yue-san. Do you finally feel like taking back your words?"

"Why...?"

"Why? Do you really not know?"

"....."

The neverending barrage of explosive slugs started putting cracks in Yue's barrier. She repaired them instantly, but the overwhelming pressure of the barrage kept her pinned in place. Though even if it hadn't, Shea's question had left Yue rooted to the spot. Yue stared at her best friend through her barrier and the sea of bullets. Why was her trust in Shea making Shea so mad? Unable to comprehend Shea's actions, Yue knitted her brow in frustration.

But when she got a better look at Shea's expression, Yue gasped. Shea looked devastated. Yue was sad too, of course, but Shea looked far worse. Tears were welling up in her eyes, and though she was yelling, it was obvious Shea was more sad than angry. Yue's words had cut deep.

Shea pulled the trigger again, a loud click echoing through the

corridor. But no bullets shot out. Shea had run out of ammo. In the silence that followed, Shea said sadly, "If you're trying to entrust him to me, doesn't that mean you don't think you'll be around in the future, Yue-san?"

"Shea..."

"Do you really think I'd accept a future like that? Do you really think I'd just say 'Sure, leave it to me!?' That I'd accept that bullshit request of yours!?"

Finally, Yue understood the source of Shea's anger. Yue had thought her request had been a way of conveying her trust in Shea. While it was true that Yue trusted Shea with her life, the way she'd phrased her request had been all wrong. Shea loved Yue. So it was only natural that a request predicated on Yue's death wouldn't be something Shea wanted to hear. Even if Yue had made that request out of faith.

Shea would never accept a future where Yue died. Realizing how much she'd hurt Shea, Yue furrowed her brows. But even so, Yue couldn't afford to take chances. What was she, really? Why had her uncle sealed her away? So long as she didn't understand those two things—

"I have to prepare for the worst..."

Yue would never take back her words. It was at that moment that Shea completely snapped.

"Like I give a fuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuck!"

"Ah!?"

Screaming in frustration, Shea threw herself at Yue like a human cannonball. The sudden assault caused Yue to falter for a moment. That momentary hesitation was all the overpowered bunny girl needed. Shea drew Drucken back, then magnified its weight with gravity magic and strengthened herself to the utmost limit. Pouring all of her sadness and frustration into a single blow, she swung down.

"Bwagh!?"

Yue's barrier shattered like glass, and the full force of Shea's hammer hit her square in the chest. The air was blown out of her lungs as she was launched backward at unbelievable speed. But Shea didn't stop there. She revolved with the force of her own swing and continued charging toward Yue.

"You don't understand a damn thing, Yue-san!"

She wound back like a pitcher and threw Drucken at Yue.

"Ngh! Hallowed Ground!"

The barrier formed around Yue just in time to block Drucken. However, the speed Shea had thrown it at had multiplied its destructive power. There was an explosion as Drucken plowed through the barrier, its speed unhindered. As Yue approached the

dead-end they'd been walking toward, the wall started to dissolve. But it was dissolving too slow for either Yue or Shea's fastball to pass through. Drucken's impact sent out a shockwave that obliterated the nearby ice and sent Yue barreling through the newly-formed opening. Its energy finally spent, Drucken fell to the floor. At the same time, Yue hit the floor and slid across it. Once she stopped she got to one knee and stared at the collapsed wall worriedly. Just then—

“Wh-What!?”

“Wh-What just happened!?”

Two confused voices called out. Specifically, Kaori and her copy. The two were locking swords. But both of them were so surprised by the sudden intrusion that they forgot their battle. Heedless of their surprise, Shea punched through the crumbling opening and walked into the room. Her ears and tail were stiff. She pulled back on Drucken's handle, and the hammer returned to her. It landed atop the handle with a satisfying clang. Shea then swung it back and started tapping her shoulder with it.

“Let me remind you what real resolve is supposed to look like, Yue-san! You better not underestimate this bunny girl!”

Turning to Yue, Shea thrust Drucken out in front of her. She was too mad to care about her surroundings right now. This was the first serious fight either of them had had with a friend since being born. Kaori and her copy watched on in confusion, their battle all but forgotten.

Let us turn back the clock a few minutes. Like everyone else, Kaori had found herself in an open room with an ice tree at the center and had been forced to fight her copy. A trial of this nature, where she'd been forced to face the ugliest sides of her, had been especially difficult considering her past. But she'd been prepared. After all, Kaori had known better than anyone just how many cracks her heart had.

“We promised to protect Hajime-kun, but we failed. We got jealous of Yue because we felt like we couldn't match up.”

“How come we weren't special?”

“How come we were the only weak one?”

“We even threw away our original body to grow stronger, so why did he pick Shea and not us!?”

“We were the one who was meant to be by his side! We're the one who loves him the most!”

“We don't want to lose him! Don't take him away from us!”

The copy's words had clung to Kaori, dragging her down into a bottomless swamp. She'd wanted to plug her ears, avert her gaze, and shout that she'd never thought any of those things. It was as if the copy knew exactly what to say to rub salt in her mental wounds. The

pain was so unbearable Kaori had wanted to scream. To hurl insults at her copy and call her a liar. But instead—

“Haaah!”

“Ngh.”

She'd stepped forward. Unhesitant, unwavering, she'd continued to march forward. Using her frustration to fuel her aggression, she'd slashed down with her twin blades. Every single one of her strokes had been unbelievably accurate. So much so that the copy had been driven back. Kaori hadn't been striking in a blind rage. She knew that cutting down her copy would mean cutting down her own weakness, and she struck with surgical precision. Her spirit had burned beautifully, clad in the divine body of God's Apostle. Her silver form had clashed with the pitch-black form of her copy.

The two had danced across the battlefield, their hair splaying out behind them. Their swords clashed endless times, sending a meteor shower of sparks through the air. The battle had been intense. But it also had a mystical beauty to it, like an ancient shinto dance. As time passed, Kaori grew even more adept at coping with her mental scars, which made her power grow in turn.

“Yaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

“Ngh, you've gotten even faster!?”

Unable to weather the onslaught, the copy jumped back. It then unleashed a beam of black disintegration at Kaori. Kaori aligned the top of her sword with her copy and unleashed a disintegration blast of her own. The two beams collided, sending out ripples of annihilation. Anything the ripples touched was obliterated instantly.

“Your jealousy, your frustration, your impatience, and your inferiority complex haven't disappeared! You're still just as ugly as before, so why are you getting stronger!?”

“Even if my feelings haven't changed, I can still grow.”

Kaori's voice was surprisingly gentle. A chill ran down the copy's spine, and it glanced over its shoulder while maintaining its beam. As it feared, Kaori had managed to create a magic circle in midair behind it using her feathers.

“Thunderburst!”

“You can even cast spells remotely now?”

The copy unfurled its wings and shot into the air. About thirty minutes had passed since the battle began. All throughout, Kaori had been unable to use her feathers to create remote magic circles. But the copy had no time to process this development, as Kaori unfurled her own silver wings and chased it down. She swung down with her blades, and the copy raised its own to block. There was a loud metallic clang as the four swords collided.

“I'm... not getting any stronger?”

Until now, the copy had been steadily growing in strength. With every barbed taunt, Kaori's heart had been further wounded. But now, that had stopped happening too.

"Seeing you like this shows me just how self-centered I am," Kaori muttered back. But she was talking more to herself than her copy.

"I was like this back in school, and even when I left Shizuku-chan to join Hajime-kun."

For two years, Kaori had been completely lacking in self-awareness. All she'd wanted was to talk to the boy she loved, but she hadn't been able to find ways to make that happen. And so, she'd thrown herself desperately at him, causing trouble for everyone in the process. She knew how big a loss her leaving the party would be for Kouki and the others. But even then, she'd been miraculously reunited with the boy she thought had died. She couldn't stand other girls being closer to him than her, so she'd prioritized her feelings over the good of the party.

"That's right. It's pathetic. We're so egotistical it's disgusting."

With how much the copy had already been strengthened, it was far stronger than Kaori. It knocked her swords aside and launched a barrage of disintegration feathers at her.

Kaori weaved her way in between the onslaught of death and said quietly, "I want to change. I want to be kind like Yue. Strong like Shea. Wise like Tio. And cute like Shizuku-chan."

Though they were in the middle of a fight, Kaori's quiet voice carried far. For a moment, the copy thought Kaori was being honest about her jealousy, but a moment later it narrowed its eyes. It could feel itself getting weaker.

Kaori turned around in midair, letting a few of the feathers strike her. However, she avoided taking any fatal damage and flapped her wings to accelerate. She moved faster than she ever had before, so fast she left afterimages in her wake.

She didn't just seem faster to the copy because it was getting weaker. She really was just getting that much faster. There was a single reason for Kaori's sudden power-up. She was finally learning how to draw out the full potential of the body she inhabited. The long hours of training were finally beginning to pay off. Her growth, as she put it, was more than just mental.

Kaori unleashed a barrage of lightning-fast sword swings. The copy deflected them all, relying on its strengthened reflexes, and said with conviction, "I see... The reason I'm growing weaker even though you haven't found a way to dissolve your negative feelings is because you're moving forward despite knowing you hold this darkness in your heart. Even before this trial began, you were already beginning to grow."

Kaori struck relentlessly, her swords trailing silver arcs through the air. Her peerless swordsmanship was now truly at the level Noint's had been. Though it was only by a factor of milliseconds, the copy was now slower.

Kaori's swords began grazing the copy, inflicting numerous superficial wounds. Feeling a sense of accomplishment, she said, "It's true, I was jealous of Shea. But at the same time, I was happy!"

When Kaori had seen Hajime accept Shea, she'd been jealous, sure. But she'd also been happy that one of her friends had had her wish granted.

"Yue really pisses me off. But at the same time, I want her around!"

Kaori would never again let her feelings of inferiority get in her way. She'd overcome those back in the Sunken Ruins of Melusine.

"I even managed to realize how Shizuku-chan feels!"

Kaori was still as reckless and straightforward as before, but she was at least more aware of her surroundings now. Rather than wallow in jealousy and hate, she had chosen to focus on bettering herself. Kaori had been facing her own negative emotions long before she'd reached this trial. Which was why—

"I'm scared of the ugliness inside of me. But I won't turn away from it!"

Kaori cast one of her evolution magic spells, Limiter Removal. In doing so, she was able to simulate the Limit Break spell Noint had been capable of using. Clad in silver mana, Kaori shot forward at unprecedented speed. She had in every way become Noint's equal in terms of strength.

"I'll never lose to myself! I'm going to protect the people I want to protect, and go back home to Japan with everyone!"

"It seems there's no need for words anymore. It looks like I won't be getting any stronger."

The copy smiled as one of Kaori's swords sent it flying. Despite transferring bodies, Kaori was still undoubtedly human in the way she'd grown. The copy landed unsteadily on the ground, and Kaori alighted across from it. The two stared at each other silently for a few seconds.

"This is the end. Here I come!"

"Very well. Show me everything you've got! Prove you have what it takes to cut down our weakness!"

Two shooting stars shot toward each other, one silver one black. They clashed in the center of the room, right next to the ice tree. Shockwaves spread outwards from their swords, and eddies of mana swirled around them.

The two of them were evenly matched, but only for a moment.

Soon enough, Kaori's swords started pushing the copy back. Like sunlight banishing away darkness, her silver mana began to erode her copy's black mana. Kaori and her copy looked into each other's eyes, their faces inches apart.

Kaori's eyes burned with a fierce determination, while her copy's were dark and silent, like the sky on a new moon. Smiling faintly, the copy closed its eyes and resigned itself to its fate. It almost looked as though it was bathing in the light of Kaori's mana. But just before Kaori could deal the finishing blow, a section of the wall crumbled away. There was a thunderous boom, and a familiar blonde girl rolled into the room.

"Wh-What!?"

"Wh-What just happened!?"

Kaori and her copy looked over in confusion. When Kaori realized the blonde girl on the floor was Yue and following in after her was Shea, she initially breathed a sigh of relief. But then she realized that Yue was sweating and her expression strained while Shea looked downright menacing. Confused once more, Kaori tried to puzzle out the situation. Before she could, though—

"Let me remind you what real resolve is supposed to look like, Yue-san! You better not underestimate this bunny girl!"

Kaori's jaw dropped open in shock as she watched Shea point Drucken toward Yue. She had never seen Shea this angry before, and she had no clue what was going on. Moments ago, she'd been about to finish the epic showdown between her and her copy, completing her somewhat traditional, but nevertheless significant personal growth arc. But now Yue and Shea had butt in with a showdown of their own, and Kaori suddenly felt left out.

The copy, being a product of the labyrinth, already knew that Shea and Yue had cleared their trials. However, it still had no idea why two allies were fighting amongst each other. To it, it seemed as though Yue and Shea were in a battle to the death. Their swords still locked, Kaori and her copy stared at each other. They came to some kind of understanding and nodded to each other. Kaori then turned to her two friends, steeling herself.

"U-Umm, Yue? Shea? What are you—"

"Shea... Listen. My memories aren't—"

"Shut the fuck up! I don't care what reason you have! The Yue-san I know and love would never act so timid! She'd never give up her position as the only person special to Hajime-san! What do you mean, 'You have to prepare for the worst!?' You damn coward!"

Yue's expression stiffened. She'd never expected to hear venomous insults from Shea, the one member of the party who treated everyone

with kindness. Meanwhile, Kaori was beginning to tear up. Yue and Shea were ignoring her completely. Her copy drew its swords back and gently patted her on the shoulder. Though it was a product of the labyrinth, even it couldn't help but sympathize with her plight.

"The reason I was sealed away wasn't what I thought it was..."

However, Yue didn't know what that reason was anymore, which was why she wanted to be ready, just in case. And the only one she could count on was Shea, the person she trusted most.

Why can't you understand how I feel!? No matter how earnest Yue's pleas were, though, Shea wasn't going to listen.

"Like I care!" Shea rejected Yue's explanation without hesitation. She didn't care what kind of shocking truths Yue had discovered. She would never accept a future without Yue in it. Nor would she accept anything Yue had to say so long as Yue didn't believe she had a future.

Why can't you understand how I feel!? Shea's sadness and frustration at Yue's stubbornness turned into anger.

"If someone stands in our way, we slaughter them and keep going forward! That's been our motto this whole time, hasn't it!? So what the hell is this preparing for the worst crap!? You stupid midget vampire!" Shea was so worked up she was just hurling insults at random now.

"M-M-M-Midget? Fufufufu, now you've done it..."

This time, it was Yue's turn to snap. Any sympathy she might have had for Shea's feelings vanished. Her eyes glinted with a fierce light. She'd tried playing nice, and it had just made Shea cocky. Shea saw the anger in Yue's eyes and scoffed. She puffed her chest out, showing off the difference between her and Yue's assets. She was clearly trying to provoke Yue.

Thunder rumbled as Yue started the process of summoning her lighting dragon. She looked absolutely murderous. The battlefield suddenly got a lot more dangerous. Kaori and her copy both brought their hands to their mouths and watched on in trepidation.

Lightning struck the ground behind Yue as she muttered, "This is your last chance to take that back, you worthless rabbit."

Shea calmly replied, "That's my line, you old midget."

There was no turning back now. Yue and Shea glared at each other, their lips twitching. Both of them were furious.

Kaori timidly butt in, "U-Umm, you two? Could you calm down for a second? I don't know what happened, but—"

"Looks like you need to be reminded just which of us is stronger. I'll turn you into roasted rabbit!"

"Hmph, I'm not worried about a cowardly midget like you! I'll beat you for sure this time!"

Yue and Shea ignored Kaori's attempts to mediate. This was going to be their first serious battle since they'd met. Yue's thunder dragon shot forward with a roar, signaling the start of the fight. It bore down on Shea, intent on frying her to a crisp. Shea responded by shooting forward with explosive force. She swung Drucken sideways, the shockwaves from the blow powerful enough to interfere with the dragon's gravity field. Without the gravity to hold it together, its lightning shot out randomly. Hair billowing behind her, Kaori watched the two of them fight with glazed eyes.

"Oh yeah... Those two are best friends. Of course they'd ignore me. Well... I guess I really am useless after all..."

"H-Huh!? My power's returning!? Get ahold of yourself, you stupid woman!"

"See, I knew it... I'm just a stupid failure..."

"Wait, no, I didn't mean that! You're not stupid at all! Those two are just so into their fight that they're not paying attention to you! It's not because you're easily ignorable or anything!"

"I knew it... It's like I don't exist to them..."

"Ah, I'm getting stronger again!?"

Kaori was so pitiful that the copy, a part of the labyrinth's trial, was trying to console her. A sight like this had never been seen before, and likely would never be seen again. Yue and Shea's fight grew even more vicious, their concentration focused solely on each other.

"I'm gonna make you eat your words, you fucking perverted vampire!"

"Like you're one to talk, you exhibitionist rabbit!"

"Who're you calling an exhibitionist!? You're the one who keeps jumping Hajime-san in public!"

"Are you saying I'm just like Tio!? I'm gonna make you piss your pants again, you leaky rabbit!"

"What!? That was ages ago! I should've known you'd get petty in your old age, you hag!"

"Fuck you! I'm gonna kill you, Shea! I'm gonna flatten those stupid bags of fat of yours with gravity magic!"

"H-How could you!? I'm going to protect Hajime-san's favorite boobs with my life!"

Or rather, Yue and Shea's fight was growing even more petty, not vicious.

Of course, all the while they were battling at a level mere mortals could barely even comprehend. Yue would fire off thousands of bolts of magic, which Shea would reflect back or destroy outright with a single swing of her hammer. And yet, the pettier the insults became, the less tense the fight got.

"Sorry, but Hajime isn't interested in big blobs of fat! He's an ass

man! More specifically, he likes *my* ass!”

“You’re delusional. Hajime-san loves my boobs! He was playing with them all night last time! It’s proof I’m better at you at fighting *and* sex! Pah!”

They’d devolved into discussing Hajime’s fetishes. Had Hajime been present for this, he probably would have been weeping in the corner with Kaori. Furthermore, Shea seemed to be channeling her inner Miledi. Her taunts were both annoying and on-point, making Yue angrier and angrier.

“I’m the one who taught you everything there is to know about sex. I’m responsible for your growth. I know everything you do! I’ll prove that no disciple of mine can surpass me!”

“Bring it on! Disciples always overcome their masters one day! I’ll beat you both at fighting and fucking right here, right now!”

A veil of pale blue light surrounded Drucken. Shea swung it faster than the speed of sound, crashing the hammer face into Yue’s lightning dragon. It blew apart in a burst of sparks, but then a second one appeared on her flank. It sped forward at tremendous speed, maw wide open.

Yue had chosen the perfect timing to strike. Shea had just finished a huge swing, meaning she inevitably had to show a momentary opening. However, Shea reacted instantly, dropping to the ground even as she was turning a full 180 degrees. The thunder dragon’s jaws closed on empty air, inches above Shea’s bunny ears. Shea then used the recoil from firing Drucken to slide underneath the dragon and used a single finger to flip herself up into the air. She landed feet-first onto the ground and launched herself at Yue.

“I’ll beat you to a pulp!”

“Weak! Just like your love for Hajime!”

Yue blocked Shea’s supersonic hammer smash with a spatial magic barrier. Shockwaves spread out in every direction, pulverizing the surrounding ice. A moment later, Yue dexterously counterattacked. She hit Shea with a space-severing strike that would turn normal humans into mincemeat.

The air creaked as it was ripped apart, and the nearby walls and ceiling disintegrated. However, Shea just—

“Secret technique— Grin and bear it!”

Withstood the attack. With her body. She was, of course, using evolution magic and strengthening magic to raise her endurance to the limit, but even Yue hadn’t expected her spell to do no damage at all. In fact, she’d been hoping the attack would have given Shea a concussion, ending the fight.

“Pathetic, Yue-san! If this is all you’ve got then you can’t stop meeeeeeeeeee!”

“You damned overpowered rabbit!”

There was a quiver of fear in Yue’s voice. She couldn’t believe how tough Shea was. Panicking slightly, Yue retreated in the face of Shea’s charge. At the same time, she gathered all of her mana.

There was a loud boom, and chunks of ice were blown off the floor and walls. Flames scorched the air, while lightning blasted through the ice. Another explosion pounded at everyone’s eardrums, and ripples of mana spread out across the room. The severity of the damage to the environment showed just how serious these two were. However—

“Yue-san, you umm... jerkface!”

“Shea you... big dummy!”

Their insults were growing even more childish. It seemed they’d run out of good ones. Kaori and her copy watched with empty eyes as Yue and Shea called each other grade-schooler names while having an epic battle the likes of which history had never seen. They were both sitting in a corner of the room, hugging their knees. Even though this was meant to be the room for her trial, Kaori had become just a spectator. She’d been seconds away from completing her trial, but now she was watching Yue and Shea insult each other. Kaori’s despair was understandable.

Her copy slowly got to its feet and said resolutely, “I’m going.”

It looked surprisingly gallant. In fact, it was hard to believe it was composed only of negative emotions. It seemed more like a brave warrior heading off to die. Kaori’s eyes widened in surprise.

“Are you going to try and stop them!? You can’t, you’ll die!”

It was far too reckless to try. The battlefield occupied by the overpowered rabbit and broken vampire was undoubtedly a field of death. The moment anyone stepped between them, they would perish. However, the copy’s resolute expression didn’t change.

“I am a trial of this labyrinth. I cannot allow others to interfere with my, with your trial. This is my pride as an offshoot of the labyrinth.”

I will do this. For my sake, and for yours. Seeing the copy’s smile, Kaori was at a loss for words. She knew full well the copy stood no chance at stopping Yue and Shea’s battle. Something even deeper than friendship was connecting the two, driving them to fight. It was possible they’d just both gone crazy.

But even so, Kaori smiled. She got to her feet and looked her copy in the eyes.

“Come back safe and sound. I’ll be waiting for you!”

“Fufu, guess I’ve got no choice but to come back now.”

Kaori looked like a loyal wife watching her husband go off to war. The scene between the two of them would have been a perfect fit in a

movie. If Kaori and her copy weren't so mentally drained, they probably would have cared more about how absurd this situation was. The copy reluctantly turned away from Kaori, then stared at the field of death, destruction, and petty insults.

"Kaori Shirasaki's copy, now sortieing!"

"Please stay safe!"

The copy charged forward without hesitation, just like the original would have. But second later—

"Outta my way!"

"Kyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!?"

It was flying through the air. The copy traced a perfect arc through the sky.

"M-My faaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaake!"

"Ngh, I-I'm fine! I can still keep going! I'll stop them, so just watch!"

The copy flipped in midair during the peak of its arc and spread its black wings to steady itself. Its hair and clothes were singed, but its resolve was unscathed. Then, it raised its twin blades and faced the battlefield with the courage of a hero. In fact, it seemed to be enjoying playing the role of the tragic martyr. That made sense, considering it was a copy of Kaori.

The copy glared at Yue and Shea and shouted in a voice loud enough to shake the heavens, "Cut it out, you two! This is our battlefield! Stop disturbing the trial!"

Two simultaneous explosions and a barrage of insults flew between Yue and Shea as they ignored the copy completely. Both of them were focused only on each other. They'd attacked Kaori's copy on reflex, registering it as nothing more than another obstacle. Annoyed at being ignored twice in a row, the copy snapped.

"Y-You bastards! Fine, I'll make it so you *can't* ignore me!"

Veins bulging in her forehead, Kaori's copy flapped its wings. Moving faster than the eye could follow, it dropped right in between Yue and Shea. As it landed, it swapped out the grip on its blades. It held its swords in front of it, flat sides facing outward. The copy was planning to knock Shea and Yue out simultaneously with the flat of its blades. Its first target was Shea, who was currently being petrified by Yue's stone dragon's breath. Using gravity to accelerate its strike, the copy slashed down at Shea.

"I've got you now! Accept your punishment!"

But just before the copy's blade hit Shea—

"Hmph!"

Shea broke free from the petrification. It seemed she'd used evolution magic and restoration magic to halt the petrification's progress. After which sheer force of will had been enough for her to

shatter the thin layer of stone that had formed over her skin. The copy didn't even have time to be impressed. As Shea broke free, she grabbed hold of the copy's blade with just one hand, avoiding getting cut by grabbing the blade between her fingers. Not only that, she'd grabbed it from the side, since Kaori's copy had intended to strike with the flat of the blade.

"You've gotta be kidding me!"

The copy was utterly nonplussed. Meanwhile, Shea was still completely focused on Yue. She yanked the copy's blade backward, like a pitcher. Then, with perfect form, she threw it right at Yue.

"Take this!"

Her throw was so perfect it could be called art. Naturally, Kaori's copy was still holding onto the blade.

"Haaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

She shot toward Yue like a black meteor. Despite her screams though, Yue only had eyes for Shea.

"Swallow it whole, Overcharged Draconic Thunder!"

A lightning dragon many times the size of Yue's previous ones descended from the sky. It opened its jaws wide, ready to catch Kaori's copy.

"Eeek!?"

The copy squealed and desperately wrapped itself in its wings, activating its disintegration abilities. Yue's oversized lightning dragon swallowed it whole. However, a second later, Kaori's copy shot out of its back. It had used its wings' disintegration powers to open a hole in the dragon. A second later, Shea dashed through the same hole. She'd charged forward the moment she'd finished throwing Kaori's copy. It seemed she'd planned to use the copy as a meat shield all along.

On the other hand, Yue blocked the path in front of her by deploying multiple Heavensfalls. She was planning to push Shea back with the power of gravity.

"Hwaaaaaaaaaah!?"

As a result, though, the copy was sucked into the gravitational field and slid across the ground toward the floating spheres. One couldn't help but pity it. Had Shizuku been present, she would probably have gone off on Shea and Yue for hurting her best friend, even knowing it was just a copy of Kaori. And the copy writhed on the floor, struggling to get up against. The moment it finally managed to raise its head—

"Mmmph!?"

Shea jumped on its face, sending it crashing back to the ground again. Without even a backward glance at what she'd stepped on, Shea swung Drucken at Yue. While Yue managed to avoid the impact by falling backward and erecting a barrier, the copy wasn't so lucky.

Shea's swing hit the ground, and the resulting shockwaves sent the copy flying. Slivers of ice glimmered all around it, as did a few droplets of water. It seemed the copy had begun crying.

The fight built up toward its climax, the combatants unaware of the poor victim they'd tormented. Both Yue and Shea's clothes were a mess, and while their respective magic had kept both of them unscathed, they were both panting. Their mana was almost gone. It was obvious both of them were nearing their limits. But they were both too stubborn to pull out their magic accessories to replenish their mana.

"Yue-san..."

"Shea..."

Yue summoned her five elemental dragons while Shea readied her ball and chain. Waves of golden mana flooded the room while a tornado of pale blue mana rose up to heavens. The air crackled as their mana collided. Realizing this would be their final clash, both of them exchanged glances. Standing between them was a stumbling Kaori copy, but neither of them paid any attention to it.

"Run away, my fake! Get out of there!"

"Fweh?"

Kaori had her hands cupped around her mouth and was screaming at her copy to flee. But the copy's reactions dulled. It seemed it still hadn't fully recovered from that earlier barrage of attacks, meaning it was in no shape to escape from this final clash.

"You don't understand a damn thing!" Shea shouted.

"You're so stubborn!" Yue replied.

Yue unleashed all five of her dragons, focusing their destructive energies on a single point. In retaliation, Shea swung with all her might at her metal ball. She sent it flying at maximum power toward the dragon onslaught. The respective pinnacles of magical and physical destructive power clashed in the center of the room. Unbelievably powerful shockwaves rippled outward, destroying everything in their path.

"Ah!?"

The copy barely even had time to scream before it was hit. The shockwaves sent it flying toward Kaori, white smoke trailing behind it. It bounced across the ground a few times, then rolled to a halt at her feet. Smoke was still rising from its body, and it wasn't moving at all.

Kaori covered her mouth and whispered, "H-How horrible..."

The copy's face twitched.

"I'm sorry. I couldn't defeat them."

It seemed the copy was still alive, though only barely. Kaori swept it up in her arms and hugged it tightly.

“Don’t talk! If you waste too much energy, you’ll die! You’ve worked hard enough! Just rest!”

“You know...”

The two of them were talking to each other as if they were lovers, but they were ostensibly the same person. Of course, the copy was being guided by the labyrinth, but their emotions and personality were fundamentally the same.

Unfortunately, their reunion was cut short by an ominous rumbling above them. The ceiling had been so badly damaged by Yue and Shea’s fight that it was threatening to collapse on top of them. Seeing the cracks directly above it, the copy shouted, “Run! I’ll be fine!”

“No way! I can’t leave you behind!”

Both of them were spouting lines that would fit right in with a soap opera.

Too weak to move, the copy implored Kaori to run away on her own. But Kaori refused to leave her behind. Of course, this all could have been solved had Kaori picked the copy up and taken it with her, but such an aesthetically displeasing solution didn’t occur to either of them.

“I am nothing more than your copy. A shadow. It is my destiny to die here.”

The copy smiled faintly. Kaori hesitated for a moment, then steeled her resolve.

“I guess you’re right. Take this!”

With a cute yell, Kaori thrust her blade into the copy’s chest.

“Wha? Why?”

Kaori looked away awkwardly and replied, “I-I mean, if you died to something that wasn’t me, the labyrinth wouldn’t recognize me as someone who’d cleared it so... my only choice was to kill you before you died.”

Kaori was absolutely correct. But that then begged the question of why she’d bothered to have that dramatic exchange with her copy moments before.

Looking back on it though, all of Kaori’s entreaties could be interpreted as her not wanting her copy to die so that she could be the one to defeat it. Of course, Kaori wouldn’t admit that to her copy now that it was beginning to disappear. The copy, however, guessed everything and its eyes glazed over.

“Fufufu, looks like we’ve grown stronger than I thought. I’m happy you’ve matured this much, but this really isn’t the way I was hoping to go out...”

Looking up, the copy noticed the labyrinth’s self-restoring properties were fixing the ceiling already. That was hardly surprising;

the labyrinth had been doing that ever since the party entered. Realizing that even its final sacrifice had been a waste, the copy slumped its head. Tears spilled from its eyes as it vanished into mist.

“Victory has never felt so hollow...”

Had anyone been listening to Kaori, they would likely have retorted “Like you have any right to say that.” The pure Kaori who had first come to Tortus was long gone. She’d been poisoned by Hajime’s philosophy now. Meanwhile, Yue and Shea’s battle had finally drawn to a close.

“Cough...”

“Wheeze...”

Both of them were lying on the ice, panting. They were so drained of mana they couldn’t even stand. Silence filled the space between them as they searched for the right words to say. After a few minutes, the first one to finally speak was Shea.

“Please don’t say such sad things anymore.”

“.....”

“If you’re worried something’s coming for you, let’s beat it up together.”

“.....”

“It doesn’t matter what we’re up against, it doesn’t matter how bad the odds are, as long as we’re together, we’ll never lose. I’m sure of it.”

Shea was surprisingly eloquent for someone completely out of breath. Yue listened quietly, her breathing slowly steadying.

“You and Hajime-san are the ones who taught me that. So no matter what you say, I’ll never accept your request. Not as long as you’re so scared you’ve given up on your own future, Yue-san.”

It was precisely because Shea could see the future that she would never allow Yue to act so defeatist. Especially since Yue was the one who stood by the side of the one man who never gave up no matter what destiny threw at him.

“Don’t entrust your future to me! Let me help you! Instead of asking me to take care of Hajime-san, ask me to fight together with you!”

Those who fought along Hajime had no need for weak-willed sentiments like self-sacrifice. If whatever was after Yue was powerful enough to destroy everyone’s future, they’d still fight it together. After all, they’d resolved to share their fates. And Yue should have known that best of all.

“I’ll never agree to your shitty request, no matter what. How could I?”

“Shea...”

Tears spilled from Shea’s eyes as her sadness finally overwhelmed

her anger. She'd hoped to beat Yue in a fight, and thus prove she was strong enough to protect her. That way, Yue would have stopped acting so weak. That was what Shea had thought. But in the end, her master had proven too tough to defeat.

Shea had failed to win, and she was just as frustrated at her own weakness as she was at Yue. The thought that Yue might die because she wasn't strong enough was unbearable. At the same time though, she couldn't stand how defeatist Yue was being. She'd kept her emotions somewhat in check during the fight, but now they were spilling over.

As Shea bawled her eyes out, Yue gingerly lifted her head off the ground and stared at her best friend. Though Yue had expended every last drop of mana and was utterly exhausted, her mind felt as cool and clear as a sunny winter morning. The haze of unease that had wrapped itself around her had vanished.

"The future is something we always have the power to change." That had been one of the first things Shea had said to Yue and Hajime. Furthermore—

"We'll beat down anyone who stands against us and bust our way out of this shitty world." She'd made that promise with Hajime.

Yeah, you're right. Yue sighed to herself. She wanted to just crawl in a hole and hide. She couldn't believe she'd shown such a pathetic side of herself to Shea.

Resolve, huh...? Shea was right. Yue had resolved to fight back when she'd escaped the abyss. What meaning was there in resolving to do anything else? Yue wanted to slap herself, but Shea had already done a good job of that.

Right now, what she needed to do was something else. She replenished her mana using one of her accessories and struggled to her knees. She then crawled over to Shea. Putting Shea's head on her lap, she gently wiped away her tears and snot.

"Shea, I'm sorry."

"Yue-san?"

Shea looked blankly up at Yue.

"You're right. It doesn't matter what happened in the past, or who I really am. I want to be together with you and Hajime. And if something stands in the way of that, we'll blast it to pieces. Isn't that right?"

"Y-Yeah, that's right."

"Mmm... Even if something does happen to me, I'm sure you and Hajime will save me. So there's nothing to worry about."

"Isn't that obvious? Waaaaaaaah."

"Mmm... I'm sorry for asking such a horrible thing from you. Can you forgive me?"

“Of course! But don’t you ever ask for something like that again! Promise me!”

“Mmm... I promise.”

Shea dragged herself up into a sitting position and hugged Yue. Savoring the warmth of her best friend’s embrace, Yue hugged her back. The two of them stayed like that for a few minutes. It felt as though the air in the room had gotten warmer. This was the first time in both of their lives that they’d fought with a friend. Fortunately, their fight had only served to strengthen their bonds. As the saying went, what hadn’t killed them only made them stronger.

However, they had completely forgotten about the one casualty of their fight. Kaori approached the pair, her footsteps breaking the silence. In a low growl, she said, “Good for you. I have no idea what you two were fighting about, but it looks like you worked it out.”

“Hm?”

Still hugging each other, Yue and Shea turned blankly to Kaori. She was smiling, but that smile didn’t reach her eyes.

“Fufufu, you look confused. I guess you didn’t even realize I was here. That’s fine, I don’t mind. Not at all. You were busy fighting each other, right? You didn’t even notice you beat up my copy while I was in the middle of my trial. That’s fine, I guess I’m just easy to ignore! Fufufufufu!”

Yue and Shea exchanged glances. Then suddenly, they remembered. *Come to think of it, didn’t I throw something in the middle of that fight? And then blow it up with my hammer?*

Shea and Yue broke out in a cold sweat. They glanced back at Kaori, then quickly averted their gazes. Guilt colored their expressions. With all the caution of a bomb disposal expert, Shea said, “Ah, umm, Kaori-san? D-Don’t you think you should calm down a little?”

“Ahahaha, that’s a good one, Shea. I’m as calm as calm can be.”

Shea shrunk back and passed the baton on to Yue.

“K-Kaori... Umm, did you manage to clear your trial?”

“Hmmm? Oh, I beat my fake alright. Killed it with my own two hands.”

Yue and Shea breathed sighs of relief. They would have felt horrible if they’d accidentally destroyed Kaori’s trial for her. However, Kaori’s next words wiped away any sense of security they had.

“Yep, I killed it... after you two had beaten it to a pulp.”

“.....”

“That still counts as a clear, right? The labyrinth won’t say it doesn’t count because you two beat it up first, right? What do you think?”

Yue and Shea once again broke out in a cold sweat. Kaori

crouched down next to them, her grinning face inches from theirs. Neither of them could look her in the eye. Despite her docile posture, there was a deep darkness in Kaori's eyes. Frankly, she was terrifying.



Unable to withstand the silent pressure coming off from Kaori, and wanting to protect her friend, Yue pointedly turned away from Kaori and said in a purposely provocative tone, “Then you should have just healed your copy and started over.”

Kaori’s smile grew deeper and even more terrifying. She’d truly lost it now.

“What did you just say, Yue?”

“It’s not my fault. You’re the one who killed it instead of healing it.”

Panicking, Shea hurriedly said, “Y-Yue-san, that’s going a bit overboard! We’re the ones in the wrong here! Hurry up and apologize!”

Much to Shea’s chagrin though, Yue just harrumphed and doubled down. Timidly, Shea looked over at Kaori. Seeing her expression, Shea hurriedly tried to apologize.

“U-Umm, Kaori-san! I’m really—”

Before she could, though, Kaori got to her feet. The only thing she was paying attention to was Yue.

“Fufu. That’s a funny joke, Yue. You barged into *my* room, messed up *my* fight, and that’s what you have to say? How about we deepen our friendship too, huh Yue?”

Kaori drew her twin blades, a murderous glint in her eyes.

Still avoiding Kaori’s gaze, Yue said, “F-Fine, bring it, you bitch!”

She dropped into some strange karate stance. Yue’s stubbornness increased tenfold whenever it came to Kaori. Likewise, Kaori had no qualms about going all out when it came to Yue.

“Fufufufu. You’re on, bitch!”

And so, round two of the best friend fights began. The room had just finished repairing itself, but it was once again ruthlessly destroyed.

“Y-Yue-san! Kaori-san! I know I’m not one to talk, but you really shouldn’t be fighting! Calm down!”

This time, it was Shea’s turn to act as mediator. No one even noticed that part of the wall had crumbled away, revealing the path forward.

Chapter II: Thank God She's Still a Pervert!

This was a dream. That much she knew. It was a nostalgic, albeit mundane dream about an inconsequential past event.

Two high school girls sat on a park bench in the evening. The setting sun dyed everything orange, and the cawing of crows filled the air. Aside from the girls, the park was mostly empty. A single elderly man was walking his dog, and no one else. Every now and again a vehicle would pass by the road adjacent to the park, the roar of its engine cutting through the ambient noise.

The two girls were slumped on the bench, looking more like exhausted office workers than high school girls.

"Aaaaaaah..." One of them moaned softly. The other, Eri Nakamura, smiled ruefully at her companion.

"Suzu, you sound like an old man."

"But Erirriiiiiiiiin..."

Suzu, for the other girl was naturally Suzu, flailed her like a child throwing a tantrum. Her pigtails flailed around her as she shook her head.

I'm pretty sure this was the day before we were summoned... Despite how she was acting, Eri examined her surroundings with cold, emotionless eyes. It was as if she'd detached from her body and was looking down on everything. *Why am I seeing this dream? It's just some pointless scene tainted by lies and deception.* However—

"Eririn, today's Sunday."

"Umm... yes, and?"

"Let me ask you something."

"Suzu, are you trying to imitate some TV actor again?"

"We're in high school now, right? Isn't it our duty to enjoy our youth and find love and friends and mostly love!?"

"I-I'm not so sure about that. Also, you said love twice."

"And yet, how did we spend our precious weekend!?"

"We took it easy?"

"You foolish four-eyed school librarian! How can you say that like it's a good thing!?"

"Wh-What does being the school librarian have to do with anything?"



Suzu reached for Eri's glasses, which she desperately protected while smiling awkwardly. To a bystander, their playful joking around made it seem as though the two of them were unbelievably close. It was just another normal weekend, with a perfectly normal pair of friends hanging out and passing the time. Eri sighed internally as she watched the scene play out.

Suzu Taniguchi was a girl who could get along with anyone. Meanwhile, Eri's goal was to make Kouki hers. The only reason she'd become friends with Suzu was to use her to get close to Kouki. To her, hanging out like this with Suzu was nothing more than a necessary annoyance.

I bet this airheaded simpleton doesn't even realize that her timid-looking best friend is actually manipulating her... Of course, Suzu wasn't the only one who'd failed to realize this.

Had you asked anyone in Eri's class what they thought of her, they'd likely say something along the lines of: "She's a quiet, introverted girl."

"But she's pretty sharp too, and whenever she opens her mouth it's to contribute something meaningful."

"She's kind, and helps people out without expecting anything in return."

"She's always smiling and knows how to compliment anyone, she's like the perfect girl."

Not a single person had realized Eri's true nature. They didn't know she was a crazy, malicious psychopath who wouldn't hesitate to hurt others if it helped her achieve her goals. Even the perceptive Shizuku had believed Eri Nakamura was a kindhearted girl. *What a joke! We were all idiots! I can't believe it!*

"Goddamn normies, taking all the guys!"

"D-Don't shout things like that, Suzu. It's embarrassing!"

When am I going to wake up from this dream? Eri thought as she stared coldly at Suzu. Unfortunately, Suzu's next words drew Eri back into the dream.

"Hey, Eri. Who do you think would be a good match for me?"

"How would I know?"

"Aww, come on, I thought your hobby was people-watching. Shouldn't you have enough data to know?"

"It's not a hobby!"

Eri mentally clicked her tongue, berating her past self for getting so flustered at that. As she was watching, she remembered. Suzu Taniguchi would occasionally point out things like that. No matter how well Eri hid her personality, Suzu had managed to glean snippets of her true self.

Eri hadn't particularly hated Suzu, nor had Suzu probed deeper into her personal life than any other person. Suzu had just managed to pick up on parts of Eri's true personality via the everyday conversations they had. Part of the reason was that whenever she was with Suzu, Eri would occasionally let her guard down and her facade would slip. Like it had just now.

Come to think of it, she always was good at sensing other people's emotions. Considering how much time we spent together, I suppose it's inevitable that she'd pick up on a few hints. Eri tried to justify her mistake to herself.

Maybe she realized I was actually a calculating, cunning woman and chose to keep hanging out with me anyway... No, there's no way that's true. Eri internally shook her head, berating her own foolishness.

Besides, that would mean she would have known I was planning something truly evil.

Ever since coming to Tortus, Eri had been overjoyed. Being summoned to another world had made it much easier to make Kouki hers. Compared to when she'd been in Japan, she'd been a lot more overt about her priorities. Especially when they'd been attacked by that demon woman in the Great Orcus Labyrinth.

She'd almost let it slip that she would have been fine with just her and Kouki escaping. At the very least, she was certain her expression hadn't been the perfect mask it had been before.

While she doubted anyone else in the class had noticed, it was plausible that Suzu, the one person who'd spent the most time with Eri, had picked up on the malice she was hiding within. But in the end, Suzu had said nothing on that fateful day. Which had led Eri to the conclusion that not even Suzu had realized. Either that, or she'd known all along and just been unable to say anything.

Personally, Eri thought the latter was the more likely option. Because Eri knew Suzu just as well as Suzu seemed to know Eri.

Suzu, you're a coward, aren't you? Even when Suzu was aware of something, she'd pretend not to be. Even when she understood, she would feign ignorance. No matter the time, no matter the situation, she'd match her wavelength with others and greet them with a cheerful smile. That was the fragment of Suzu Taniguchi's true nature that Eri was aware of.

Eri laughed derisively at her friend's cowardice. Just then, she suddenly felt like she was floating. The dream crumbled away like a sandcastle. It looked like she was waking up. Eri floated away from the dream, feeling not the slightest hint of regret. She cut away her past without remorse. From the very bottom of her heart, she didn't care about her so-called friend.

“Mmm...”

Eri sat up and stretched. She looked around her room, the one she'd been granted in the demon lord's castle. It was midafternoon, and sunlight was pouring through her window. As far as she could tell it was the same time of day that she'd fallen asleep. Meaning she'd been sleeping for a day or more. Eri sniffed, still feeling like she was in a dream. A vast presence flew in overhead, and Eri realized this must have been what had woke her.

“It's time to leave.”

“Oh, you came all the way here to tell me that personally? You're such a nice guy, Freid.”

General of the demon army, Freid Bagwa was looking down at Eri from atop his white dragon, Uranos. He furrowed his brow in response to Eri's flippant tone. He wasn't a fan of how actively malicious she was.

Unfortunately, Eri's default state was annoying, so everything she did pissed Freid off. Freid himself knew saying anything was a waste of time, so he just shook his head.

“Don't do anything rash. Follow my orders. I don't want to have to bury you.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know.”

Freid harrumphed and turned Uranos around, flying out the open window. A pair of ashen wings appeared on Eri's back, and she got to her feet. Her hair had also turned grey, and she looked like a slightly dirtier version of a God's Apostle. As she watched Freid fly off, Eri looked back at the room she'd been dreaming in. She couldn't fathom why her brain had shown her a dream like that.

However, it was undeniable that she'd dreamt of someone she'd never even once considered a friend. Perhaps that was why she felt compelled to say, “You always avert your eyes from the truth. That's your weakness, Suzu.”

Her whispered words were carried away by the wind, heard only by herself. A moment later, she flapped her wings and chased after Freid. Suzu wasn't even on her mind anymore. Even if they ended up meeting again, Eri wouldn't think anything of it.

“That's our weakness.”

Suzu's copy sneered at her. Its hair, skin, and even the fans in its hands were pure white, the opposite of Suzu herself. Its crimson eyes glared at Suzu. She was panting heavily and surrounded on all sides by her copy's crimson barriers. A second later, those barriers began emitting an overwhelming pressure.

“Ngh! Hallowed Ground!”

Suzu crafted her own barrier to defend herself, and it pushed

against the copy's gravity barrier and started destroying it from the inside. Shards of glimmering yellow barrier mixed with wispy tendrils of crimson mana as the two barriers canceled each other out. Suzu then swung her fans down, summoning a gravity barrier of her own to assault her copy. Forced back by the pressure, the copy fell to its knees. However, it was still sneering.

"Even though you know. Even though you understand better than anyone!"

Even though it was the copy who was under attack, Suzu felt like she was the one being pushed back. The copy's words squeezed Suzu's heart like a vice, and she could feel her composure breaking. *No! It's not my fault! I didn't know anything!* Suzu wanted nothing more than to shout those words back. After all, admitting her copy was right meant admitting she was partly to blame.

"You knew from the start, didn't you? You realized from the very beginning that Eri wasn't just a nice, quiet girl."

Everyone else had thought that was all Eri was. But not Suzu. From the start, she'd known Eri had a cunning streak to her. The reason Eri put on an introverted persona was so she could observe people from afar and make sure she could secure a safe spot for herself.

Naturally, Suzu never pointed that out. But she'd never thought less of Eri for it either. Because Suzu had thought Eri was only like that to protect herself. It was the whole reason Suzu had wanted to be Eri's friend in the first place. Suzu would never blame someone for putting on an act to protect themselves. She couldn't. After all—

"You thought she was just like you, didn't you?"

Blaming Eri for putting on a facade would have been equivalent to denying herself. There was a sharp *crack* as the copy destroyed Suzu's barrier. It then assaulted Suzu with a barrier of its own. This time walls of fire bore down on her.

Suzu quickly neutralized it with a water barrier. She used her left fan to protect herself, while she swung down her right to create another barrier to restrict her copy's movements.

"How about I help remind you just what kind of person you are. Along with what crimes you've committed!"

Both sides continued deploying and neutralizing barriers in a defensive tug-of-war. Suzu's class was Barrier Master, and her focus was on defense. Because of the way her skills worked, she couldn't move much while fighting. Meaning both Suzu and her copy just stood in the same places, dancing with their fans to summon yet more barriers. This was what a fight between Barrier Masters looked like.

As their battle raged on, the copy's words continued to worm their way into Suzu's ears. Though she was focusing entirely on her battle,

Suzu was still forced to relive old memories. The first was a memory from back when she was still a child, and much less cheerful.

For as long as she could remember, Suzu's parents had been workaholics. Day and night, they'd worked. They'd rarely ever shown up for parent-teacher conferences or participated in school events where parents were invited. In fact, Suzu had been practically raised by the caretaker they'd hired for her. Suzu had more memories of spending time with her than her actual parents. Whenever her caretaker had left, Suzu had been left alone in that huge house.

Perhaps because of the isolated environment she'd grown up in, Suzu hadn't been very cheerful as a child, and she hadn't had many friends. Lonely, but also unsure of how to get rid of her loneliness, Suzu's childhood had been an unhappy one. Had it not been for her cheerful and lively babysitter, Suzu might have ended up even gloomier than she had.

It wasn't that her parents hadn't loved her. They'd been careful about not spoiling her, and even if Suzu was often asleep by the time they returned home, they'd check up on her every night. But that hadn't been nearly enough for a young child like Suzu. So even when she'd been awake when her parents came home she'd pretended to be asleep, or if they'd made time to come home early she'd just pouted instead of spending time with them.

It had been thanks to Suzu's babysitter that she'd been able to transform from a gloomy, moody child, into the cheery, outgoing girl she was now. A few years after she'd been employed, the caretaker had been able to see Suzu slowly turning into an unsociable child, and had given her some advice.

"Just smile."

Honestly, it had been pretty half-assed advice, but the old caretaker had meant it from her heart. Furthermore, she'd been like a second mom to Suzu. Though Suzu hadn't fully believed that was all it would take, she'd been willing to try anything to alleviate her loneliness. First, she'd tried smiling at her parents.

"Mom, Dad! Thank you!"

She'd acted overjoyed the next time they'd given her a present. Honestly, she'd still felt annoyed at them for neglecting her all the time, but she'd pushed those emotions down. Naturally, her parents had been surprised by her sudden change in attitude, but they'd also been happy.

"N-No problem, Suzu! Daddy wants you to be happy!"

"Suzu, come give your mom a hug!"

She'd never seen them smile so happily before. Of course, their workload hadn't changed, but now they seemed happy when they were with Suzu rather than apologetic. And that, in turn, made Suzu

happy for real.

In time, she'd tried smiling more at school as well. Even though she wasn't necessarily having fun at school, she'd smile all the time anyway.

Before she knew it, she'd made dozens of friends. And all of them had seemed happy to be spending time with her. In a flash, her dreary school life had become exciting.

It was then that Suzu had learned that smiling was the solution to her problems. As long as she was smiling, she'd never be alone. And thus, the class mood maker was born. From then on, Suzu was always smiling cheerfully, even if she didn't actually feel that happy inside. She kept her happy, joking persona up no matter what.

"You empathized with Eri's calculating nature, didn't you!?"

Suzu snapped back to the present. It seemed she'd been paying too much attention to her memories. While she'd been distracted by the barrier battle and her own thoughts, her copy had snuck a few moving barriers—Heaven Crushers—underneath her defenses and slid them across the floor to her.

By the time she realized she was in trouble, it was already too late. The Heaven Crushers unleashed a blinding flash, and exploded in a burst of mana, sending shards of barrier flying everywhere. Her copy had hit her with a barrier burst.

"Gah!"

Suzu just barely managed to protect her vitals with her fans, but the blast sent her flying backward and she hit the ground with a thud. After rolling for a few meters, Suzu came to a stop and gingerly got to her feet. Judging by how little she was talking, Suzu was at her limits both physically and mentally.

However, for some reason, the copy shot her a confused, probing look. But then a second later it sneered again and added, "You thought Eri was just like you. You believed she'd empathize with you too. Which is why you really, truly, believed she was your best friend."

Suzu had thought Eri was just acting to protect herself, not because she was evil. She'd believed that Eri really did care about her friends, and just acted the way she did as a self-defense mechanism.

"No, that's not true. You *wanted* to believe that."

Suzu had ignored all the warning signs she'd noticed since coming to Tortus. Though she'd started to suspect that Eri might actually be evil, she'd pretended not to see anything. She'd just blindly put her faith in Eri and stamped down all of her suspicions. She'd been too scared to confront the truth.

In the back of her mind, though, she knew that the moment Eri Nakamura's mask came off, their friendly relationship would come to

an end.

“So you ran from Eri.”

“.....”

As a result—

“You invited a tragedy.”

Because of Suzu’s willful ignorance, two of her classmates, Captain Meld, and a whole host of other knights died. On top of that, Kaori nearly lost her life as well.

“You should have confronted Eri. You should have asked her what she was really thinking! You were the only one who even had an inkling of what she really was! You were the only one who could have stopped that tragedy! But instead, you ran away! In order to protect your fragile little heart, you averted your gaze from an inconvenient truth! And in doing so, you averted your gaze from your best friend!”

Suzu’s copy laid down criticism after criticism. But all of those statements were something Suzu herself had thought at least once.

“Ngh...”

Suzu grit her teeth, unable to argue back. This was the darkness residing in her heart, the darkness she hadn’t told anyone—the overwhelming guilt she felt at not confronting Eri earlier. She’d told herself over and over there was no way her best friend was evil, and given up critically examining the evidence thrust before her. As a result, tragedy had struck. Even if she hadn’t possessed the courage to confront Eri herself, she should have at least brought her concerns to Shizuku. That way, they might have been able to prepare.

Of course, all of those were what-ifs. At the end of the day, it had been Eri who’d chosen the path of evil, and Suzu was one of her victims. Suzu knew that if she told Shizuku what she was feeling, that’s what she would tell her.

However, even if Suzu understood that in her head, she couldn’t rid herself of the guilt that gnawed at her. And her copy was a manifestation of that guilt. Which was why it was mercilessly dredging up that guilt and laying it bare.

“You might even have been able to do something to save Eri before she became so twisted. And despite that, you have the gall to call her your best friend?”

“.....”

“You thought everything would turn out fine as long as you were smiling, didn’t you? But in truth, all that did was give you a bunch of shallow friendships. There’s not a single person you’re actually close to, is there? And yet you thought you weren’t alone anymore. Eri was right, you’re a moron.”

Suzu silently swung her fans at her copy. Dozens of Heaven Crushers appeared out of thin air and rushed toward it. Once they’d

crowded around the copy they exploded in a series of barrier bursts. Countless jagged barrier shards shot toward the copy.

However, the copy emerged unscathed. It had been able to block the barrage with a simple barrier, and it looked disdainfully down at Suzu, its mouth hidden by a fan. It had grown a great deal stronger since the start of the fight.

Suzu had remained silent throughout, taking all of the copy's barbed insults without fighting back. Her face was twisted in pain and anguish, and she was the only one taking damage from the back and forth barrier attacks the two were unleashing. Not a single one of her barrier techniques had gotten past her copy's defenses. That difference in strength between them made it clear just how shaken Suzu was by her copy's words.

"Even if you do get to meet Eri again, what will you do? You don't even know what you want to say to her. Besides, even you think she's just going to try and kill you again."

The copy was even using Suzu's apprehensions for the future as a weapon. While it was true that Suzu desperately wanted to meet Eri again, it was also true that she was afraid to do so, and that she had no idea what to say to her former best friend. On top of that, she was still dragging along the guilt and self-loathing of not confronting Eri earlier with her.

Every single one of her regrets and fears had been laid bare. Her heart had been beaten to a bloody pulp, just as much as her body had. And yet—

"Despite all my insults, I'm not getting much stronger. In fact, I've stopped getting stronger at all."

The copy's sneer turned into a frown. It was then that Suzu finally opened her mouth. Her voice was surprisingly firm, as was her gaze.

"I knew it, that's how this trial works. In that case, you won't be getting any stronger from here on out."

"So it seems. Ever since I blew you away with those Heaven Crushers, your resolve has slowly been growing... I see now, the reason you didn't say anything back was because..."

This whole time, Suzu had been focused on herself. This was a trial Suzu had longed for. From the beginning, she'd wanted to be forced to face her weakness. Because even before she'd entered this labyrinth, she'd promised herself she wouldn't run away anymore. It was only by doing so that she'd found the courage to ask Hajime to travel with him. She was nearly drained of mana, her face was pale, her breath came in short gasps, and her hands trembled as she held her fans. But her stance, her gaze, and her voice had a wild beauty to them.

"Everything you said is absolutely right. I really was a coward.

But that doesn't matter anymore. I'm done with trying to protect myself. Ever since I saw that dream in Haltina's labyrinth, I realized I'd been running away from what really mattered."

"That was quite the fantasy you saw, wasn't it?"

The copy sneered again. But this time, Suzu smiled too. It was a smile marred by pain and suffering, but that smile came from the heart.

"That dream could have been a reality if I'd just accepted reality to begin with."

Her eyes clear of doubt, Suzu began talking, more to herself than her copy.

"Back then, when Umeko-san told me to just smile, she hadn't meant that smiling was the only thing I needed to do. What she'd been trying to say was that if I'd wanted to understand others, first I needed to open up my own heart to them. I only realized that now, though."

Suzu had managed to open up to others more. But not fully. Because she'd been a coward. She'd been afraid of making her friends angry. She'd been terrified of being abandoned by them. As a result though, she'd lost the one person she'd called her best friend.

"You're right. I still don't know what I'm going to say to Eri when I see her again. I don't know if I want to yell at her, apologize for not paying better attention to her, or try to persuade her to come back."

That night, the night she'd been betrayed, Suzu's heart had been ripped to shreds. A torrent of emotions had welled up within her, and it had taken everything she'd had to keep it together. It still was. Suzu had no doubt that when she met Eri again, that dam would burst. However—

"I have no idea what to say, but I know I have to see her again."

She would never again repeat the blunders she'd made in the Haltina Woods. From now on, she wouldn't avert her gaze from the truth, no matter how painful it was. The fiery determination in her eyes made that clear.

"My power's weakening. It looks like that resolve of yours is the real deal."

"Yep. I'm tired of seeing sweet dreams. I'll surpass you and keep moving forward! Gather and become whole— Hallowed Ground - Reversal!"

Suzu fuelled her determination into her magic and cast her greatest spell yet. As she swung her fans down, the entire room began to glow. Countless tiny dots glimmered in the air like stars in the night sky. They were the shattered fragments of all the barriers Suzu had cast thus far. The fragments swirled around the copy, forming a galaxy of stars around it. After a few seconds, they began taking shape.

"So you... I see. You controlled all of the barriers you cast with

your left fan, the one enchanted with restoration magic. All so you could bring them back. Did you plan this from the very start?"

"I know that labyrinth trials aren't easy to overcome. Ever since the whisps started, I thought it'd come to this. And I knew I'd need a trump card."

Suzu hadn't just been throwing barriers out willy-nilly. The number of barriers she'd summoned with her left fan numbered 150. Furthermore, she'd poured all of her remaining mana to create another 300 barriers to add to the massive barrier burst she was preparing. All of her shields converged on the copy. They glowed orange as they approached, preparing to explode. The entire room was filled with a sunset-orange glow, and the colossal mass of barriers looked like a mythical floating castle. In the center of that glowing orange castle stood the copy, looking surprisingly tranquil.

"Very well. Show me just how strong that will of yours is! Prove you've overcome your weakness!"

"Thank you for existing, trial. Here I come! Bloom into a thousand flowers—"

Smiling slightly, Suzu thrust her fans forward.

"Blossom Burst!"

There was an explosion of light so bright, and for a moment it felt as though a sun had suddenly appeared in the room. Light blanketed everything, blotting out even sound. Seconds later, the sound of the explosion followed, rocking the room with its force.

Suzu had used all of her available mana for one massive barrier burst. Unlike her usual barrier burst spells, this was a full-out attack that required her to control as many barriers as possible and explode them simultaneously. It was Suzu's ultimate trump card. Since her focus had been solely on offense, Suzu hadn't been able to erect any barriers to protect herself. The shockwaves from the explosion blew her away too, and she slammed into the wall behind her.

It took all of her concentration to remain conscious through the pain. She couldn't hear anything except an incessant ringing. Though she was too drained to move, she kept her blurry vision firmly focused on the enemy in front of her. Shattered barrier fragments and dislodged shards of ice glittered in the air. But there was no copy to be seen. Instead, a gentle voice seemed to whisper directly into Suzu's ear.

"It'd be nice if your feelings reached her."

Relief flooded Suzu, and her consciousness began to fade.

I think I'll rest... for just a little bit... Suzu watched as a section of the far wall crumbled away to reveal a new passage, then passed out with a smile on her face.

Some time later, Suzu slowly found herself waking from a deep slumber. It felt as though she was floating up from a dark pool of water. The pool itself was surprisingly comfortable, like a cradle. It even rocked her slightly with waves.

Consciousness hazy, Suzu felt as though it couldn't hurt to sink back into the pool for a little while longer. But just as she began to close her eyes again, the thudding of footsteps and a warm hand on her cheeks forced her into full wakefulness.

"Wh-What!? What's going on!? How did—"

"Yo, Suzu. Finally awake?"

"Huh? Ryutarou-kun?"

"In the flesh."

For a moment Suzu had thought she was being kidnapped by an ogre, but then she heard Ryutarou's familiar voice and relaxed. It seemed Ryutarou was carrying her on his back.

Feeling a bit guilty for mistaking him for an ogre, Suzu cleared her throat and asked, "Umm, why are you carrying me, Ryutarou-kun?"

"Well, you see. I beat that fucking asshole who looked just like me and went through the new tunnel that opened up. It led into another room that looked just like the one I was fighting in, where I found you unconscious in the corner. So I picked you up and took you with me. You wouldn't wake up no matter how much I shook you, and I wasn't about to suplex you awake, so carrying you was the only option."

"Yeah if you'd suplexed me awake, I would have barrier bursted you in the face."

Suzu glared reproachfully at the back of Ryutarou's head. *Still, considering he used to go off about things like gender equality before hitting girls, I guess you could say Ryutarou-kun's grown a little too.* Suzu evaluated Ryutarou, her thoughts uncharacteristically arrogant.

"But... I never knew our trial rooms were connected to other people's."

"Looks like it. Who's room do you think we're going to?"

"I hope it's Kaorin or Tio-san. I'm still pretty tired and... Oh yeah. Thanks for carrying me, Ryutarou-kun. You must have had a pretty tough fight too. Are you okay? Is carrying me tiring you out?"

Though she could only see his back, Suzu could tell that Ryutarou had taken a significant amount of damage during his fight too. Like Suzu, his equipment was torn. In fact, he looked like he'd taken even more physical damage than Suzu. And though he was trudging along with the same heavy footsteps as always, he seemed slightly off-balance. He was also walking a bit slower than usual.

"Don't worry. You're light, Suzu. It's like I'm carrying a roll of toilet paper."

“Excuse me? What kind of metaphor is that?”

Even if he'd grown, it seemed Ryutarou was still wholly lacking in tact. Suzu glared at Ryutarou again. *Depending on your answer I may have to kill you.*

Ryutarou shivered, then tentatively said, “I-I meant as light as a flower?”

Was that good enough? Well whatever, I'll just deal with it.

Fortunately, Ryutarou's save satisfied Suzu and she asked, “All joking aside though, are you sure you're okay? You don't look too good.”

Relieved that Suzu's tone had returned to normal, Ryutarou replied cheerfully, “This is nothing. I just dislocated a shoulder, broke five ribs, and one arm. No big deal.”

“That sounds like a really big deal to me!”

“Nah, man. I popped my shoulder back in and I've been using Diamond Skin to keep my arm usable so—Gah!?”

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah! Ryutarou-kun, you're coughing up blood!”

Ryutarou doubled over, blood spilling from his mouth. The sight was so ghastly it would likely win first place in a most shocking videos contest. Pale-faced, Suzu jumped off of Ryutarou's back and hurriedly cast healing magic on him. She didn't have an affinity for it like Kaori, so her healing magic wasn't too effective. She'd only learned a few beginner spells in case of emergencies.

Still, her elementary healing magic was enough to heal most of Ryutarou's minor wounds, and stop him from coughing up blood, so it definitely helped. Ryutarou wiped the corners of his mouth and grinned. It was hard to imagine he'd been bleeding out seconds ago.

“Whoa, I'm healed! Thanks, Suzu!”

“You're not healed at all. You know, Ryutarou-kun, you coughed up like a bucketful of blood. How can you still act like you're fine? Are you a minotaur? Or just stupid?”

“You sure don't pull your punches. I mean if you've healed me this much, I can power through everything else with guts, so it's fine.”

“Guts, huh? How convenient.”

Looking haggard, Suzu finished healing Ryutarou. She wanted to argue back, but she knew of a certain rabbit that powered through literally everything with guts, so she couldn't.

I want to see Shizushizu... She's normal. I need someone who can heal my heart more than my body... Though she thought that, Suzu still cast a bit of healing magic on herself too.

Most of what she was able to heal were small cuts and bruises. There was nothing she could do about the deep exhaustion she felt or the dull ache in her joints she'd been feeling ever since slamming into the wall. For that, she needed either Tio or Kaori's help.

Seeing Suzu's exasperated expression, Ryutarou hurriedly added, "W-Well, I guess I'm also pumped up since I finally managed to clear one of the labyrinth trials."

"Oh, yeah, I get that. It's a nice feeling knowing you can actually fight... unlike how it went back in the forest."

"I know, right."

"By the way, how'd your trial go, Ryutarou-kun? I feel like you're the kind of guy who never worries about anything... Oh, but if you don't want to talk about it, it's fine."

Suzu was basically implying, "You're a musclehead so it's not like insults can hurt you anyway, right?" which was pretty harsh for the otherwise cheerful Suzu. It seemed she'd finally started to give up her mask.

On the other hand, Ryutarou didn't really mind the implied insult. Rather, he didn't even seem to pick up on it.

"Nah, I don't mind talking about it. It wasn't anything special, anyway. My fake just called me a cowardly loser and shit."

Suzu gave Ryutarou a blank look. Ryutarou was the kind of guy who'd charge headfirst into any challenge, no matter how dangerous. She couldn't imagine him being scared of anything. In fact, he was a paragon of reckless courage. Of all the things for the copy to point out, cowardice seemed like the strangest choice. Seeing Suzu's confused expression, Ryutarou smiled awkwardly.

"I've just been trying to hide it by acting tough, you know. Like think about it, I'm way weaker than Kouki and Nagumo."

"You mean..."

"You'll always be a side character. The guy the true protagonists always need to come save."

"You're jealous, aren't you? You wanna be that guy who stands in the spotlight."

"But you know why you never try to steal it for yourself?"

"I've always thought I could never beat those two. And I've always been scared of losing to them. I never wanted to challenge them cause I was afraid losing would prove it. Prove that I'm just a worthless sidekick. That's the kind of shit my fake told me."

"You really thought that?"

The two of them continued walking down the corridor, side by side. Suzu looked hesitantly up at Ryutarou, who smiled ruefully and nodded.

"That annoying fake was basically me, right? Means I'd definitely been thinking that in the back of my mind."

At the very least, Ryutarou knew he hadn't been able to deny those claims. He scratched his head awkwardly and continued his story.

“You know how before we got summoned here, Kouki and I used to stick our noses into other people’s business all the time?”

“Yep. Well, it’s more like Kouki-kun attracted everyone else’s problems. Shizushizu was always talking about how hard she had it.”

“Yeah, that sounds about right. Anyway, most of the time we’d end up saving girls from delinquents and shit. And every time we did, Kouki was the only one they’d thank.”

“Aaaaaaah...”

Suzu could see what Ryutarou was getting at. Kouki looked like a knight in shining armor. He stood out like a sore thumb. On top of that, he was unbelievably charismatic.

“So yeah, even the girls I had crushes on all went for Kouki instead of me.”

“Ooof.”

Suzu was beginning to wonder why Ryutarou was even friends with Kouki. She sympathized with his plight. While she was still busy processing all these new revelations, Ryutarou dropped another bombshell on her.

“Even Yue-san’s Nagumo’s woman.”

“Yeah, she... Wait...? What...? WHAT!?”

Suzu shrieked, her scream echoing down the corridor. Her eyes looked like they were about to pop out of her skull. She was so surprised she came to a stop and took a few steps back. Blushing, Ryutarou looked away and zipped his mouth.

“Hold on, are you for real? Ryutarou-kun, you like her? Seriously?”

“Why do you look so surprised? Is it that weird that I fell for her!?”

“N-No, not really, it’s just... you never showed it or anything, Ryutarou-kun...”

“You really think I could try to hit on her when the two of them are flirting 24/7?”

“Poor Ryuarou-kun...”

“Shut up! I’m not pitiful! Besides, when did you become this mean!?”

Suzu looked at Ryutarou as if he were an abandoned puppy and gently patted his arm. Ryutarou angrily slapped her hand away and changed the topic.

“Anyway, my fake talked about how I was only pretending to be content with being the sidekick even though I actually wanted to be the main character.”

“I see now. So did your copy get stronger too, Ryutarou-kun?”

“Stronger? What do you mean?”

“Huh? Isn’t the whole trial about whether you reject or accept

your feelings? And your copy gets weaker or stronger depending on what you do?"

"What're you talking about?"

Ryutarou wasn't following at all. Suzu and Ryutarou both cocked their heads in confusion. Suzu briefly explained the rules of the trial, but Ryutarou still looked confused. It seemed his trial had gone differently than hers.

Ryutarou's copy had offered him a deal. It had asked him to join hands with it to gain the power to supplant Kouki and the others as the protagonist. The power to do as he wished and take whatever he wanted through sheer force alone. He'd be able to become his ideal self.

"So there are people who had trials like that too..."

Rather than overcoming himself, Ryutarou's trial had focused on how well he could resist temptations offered to him. Considering the gods were likely to employ similar means, it made sense as a trial.

Maybe the trial thought he didn't have enough negative emotions, so it tried to tempt him as a last resort or something...? Nah, can't be.

"S-So, what happened when you took the fake's hand?"

"Hey... Do you really think I'd accept a deal like that?"

Suzu averted her gaze. And in response, Ryutarou sighed and said, "Even I'm not stupid enough to think taking that fake's hand was a good idea. I just punched the shit out of it."

"Huh, so you didn't succumb to temptation?"

Suzu gave Ryutarou a look of admiration, but instead of seeming proud of himself, Ryutarou's expression was oddly stiff. His eyes glazed over and he said, "Just think about it. If I'd actually gotten all that power and did whatever I'd wanted, what do you think would have happened?"

"Hm? Well, you'd be able to take whatever you want by force so... Oh."

Suzu's look of confusion transformed into one of sympathy. Had Ryutarou failed the trial and given in to his base desires, it was obvious what he'd try to do first. Make Yue his. But Suzu and Ryutarou both knew how that would end up. No matter how much power the labyrinth gave him, "You'd get destroyed by Nagumo-kun."

"Just like Hiyama."

Having seen how close Hajime and Yue were, Ryutarou had already made his peace with the fact that she'd never look his way. Trying to change that now was paramount to suicide. The copy may have thought it was trying to tempt Ryutarou into a life of decadence, but to him it had seemed like nothing but a road leading straight to death.

"I ended up yelling, 'What the fuck's wrong with you!? Take a

hard look at reality! If I do that I'm just gonna die!' at my fake."

Ryutarou had then snapped and defeated his copy in the ensuing fistfight.

After hearing out his story, Suzu said, "So you basically beat your trial by throwing a tantrum."

In the end, I guess that's just how Ryutarou-kun is... Suzu's shoulders slumped in disappointment. Ryutarou shrugged, then resumed walking down the corridor.

"Still..." Suzu said with a grin, refusing to let the topic die. She felt happy that Ryutarou had been willing to share his deepest feelings with her. As a result, she felt no reason to be reserved around him.

"I'm kinda surprised. I never thought you'd fallen for Yue-oneesama, Ryutarou-kun."

"You're still going on about that? Besides, what's so weird about that anyway? You're the one who's been calling her onee-sama ever since that day!"

"Oh yeah, good point. I guess it's not that weird after all."

Suzu clapped her hands together. The day Ryutarou was referring to was the day Hajime and Yue had saved them from the demon and her monsters in the Great Orcus Labyrinth. Yue had looked dazzlingly beautiful as she'd cut through swathes of monsters with her azure fire dragon.

She'd fought with such poise, despite her young appearance. On top of that, she'd shown a sliver of kindness to Suzu. It was only natural that all the students present for that battle had fallen for her. In the same way that Suzu had come to call her onee-sama, Yoshiki Saitou, Shinji Nakano, Ayako Tsuji, and Mao Yoshino had all come to respect Yue immensely. So it was hardly strange that Ryutarou felt something similar.

"You better not tell anyone this."

"I won't. You'd just get teased about it if I did. Actually, why did you even bother telling me?"

"Well, I guess I shouldn't have, but..."

"Oh. You just wanted someone to hear you out... didn't you?"

"I always forget how sharp you are. Yeah, that's basically it. Sorry for grumbling about all this crap to you."

Ryutarou smiled ruefully at Suzu, and she smiled back.

"But still, you really shouldn't try to fight every challenge head-on like that. Kaorin's gonna get mad if you keep showing up all beat up."

"My fake's face just pissed me off so much. Just thinking about it makes me want to deck him again."

"You could always start punching mirrors."

The two continued bantering with each other for a few minutes until they finally reached a dead end. It seemed they'd found the next

connecting room.

“Oh, we’re here.”

“I really hope it’s Kaorin or Tio-san’s room...”

Suzu brought her hands together in prayer, then approached the wall of ice. As she neared, it melted away to reveal the room beyond. Fortunately for Suzu, her prayers were answered. However—

“Kyaa!?”

“Uwooooh!?”

The first thing to greet Suzu and Ryutarou as they stepped into the room was a torrent of magic. Yelping in surprise, Ryutarou hurriedly jumped in front of Suzu and crossed his arms defensively in front of him. At the same time, Suzu erected a powerful barrier.

After the shockwaves faded, the two of them looked up to see Tio and her copy exchanging breath attacks.

Let us rewind the clock to a few minutes before Suzu and Ryutarou’s arrival. Tio faced off against her white-haired, white-robed copy while illusory pitch-black flames danced at the edges of her vision.

Those flames were a manifestation of the hatred that raged within her. The seeds of that hatred had been planted 500 years ago, when the dragonmen had been eradicated from history, along with their prosperous nation.

“Even though we cared for the weak and powerless, even though we supported them and protected them from harm...”

The copy’s voice was a mixture of scorn and regret. It summoned up a wave of flames which threatened to swallow Tio whole.

“True. We dragonmen offered protection to all who sought it, regardless of race, nationality, or gender.”

Replying calmly, Tio swung her arm down. Her kimono sleeve fluttered in the breeze, and a wall of wind rose up to meet the wave of fire. The wind collided with the flames, absorbed it, and transformed the wave into a fiery tornado that Tio sent rushing back at her copy.

“Was there anyone not saved by our grace? Was there anyone not moved by our virtuous and noble nature!? Was there anyone who did not respect us!?”

The copy transformed into a beautiful, white-scaled dragon and charged right through the burning tornado. It headed for Tio, planning to crush her flat beneath the weight of its charge.

“Others praised us, calling us the strongest and most noble nation in the world.”

There was a flash of black light, and Tio transformed into her dragon form as well. She braced herself, taking the copy’s tackle head-on. She was unable to absorb the full force of the blow though and

was pushed back to the wall. There was a clear difference in strength between the two of them.

Emboldened, the copy shouted, “Our nation was meant to be a paradise! A place where the weak and the strong, the rich and the poor, could live together in harmony!”

The path to reaching that paradise hadn’t been an easy one. Upholding the lofty ideals of the dragonmen had been an unbelievably difficult ordeal.

For centuries, other races had laughed at the dragonmen’s dreams, looking down on them as nothing more than foolish idealists. But thanks to the blood, sweat, and tears of generations of dragonmen, they finally created the ideal country they’d dreamed of. A firm, unyielding nation filled with kindness and warmth. Having realized an ideal all others thought impossible, the remaining races had bowed their heads in respect to the dragonmen.

From then on, dragonmen were the protectors of the world, the arbiters of peace. They were the true rulers of Tortus.

“Indeed,” Tio muttered, her voice tinged with sadness.

Just before Tio crashed into the wall, she wreathed herself in a veil of black light. A second later there was a massive boom, and a section of the wall was pulverized. However, Tio wasn’t anywhere near the wall. In fact—

“Limiter Removal.”

Enhanced by evolution magic, Tio’s black breath shot toward her copy. She’d slipped directly underneath the white dragon and was firing at it from below. Just before being slammed into the wall, Tio had canceled her transformation, allowing her to fall underneath her copy. Blindsided by the counterattack, Tio’s copy nevertheless managed to spread out its wings and stop its backward momentum just before it crashed into the tree at the center of the room. It then opened its maw and fired a breath of white breath back at Tio.

Surprisingly, its breath attack was even stronger than Tio’s who’d been using evolution magic. Scorching the air as it passed, the breath rumbled ominously as it rushed toward Tio. The breath enveloped Tio, and instantly liquified the ice floor underneath her. The breath then faded away, revealing emptiness where once Tio had stood. It was like she’d been vaporized.

The copy canceled its transformation and landed softly on the floor. Then, as if nothing had happened, it resumed its speech.

“But everything we worked for was destroyed, turned to ash by the wickedness of gods and men.”

The copy turned to the side. As expected, Tio was standing there. She’d used the residual heat from her own breath to leave a mirage of herself behind, which was what had been hit by the copy’s attack.

When Tio had hit the copy with her breath, it had lost sight of her for just a second. And in that second, Tio had left an illusion in her wake and moved elsewhere. Such a feat could only be called godlike. Unfortunately, that didn't change the fact that Tio was losing in terms of raw power.

Tio and her copy thrust their hands forward, releasing simultaneous breath attacks. Two breaths, one black, one white, collided with each other. A stunning contrast of dark and light filled the room. The two breaths were not of equal strength, however. Slowly but surely, the white breath started pushing the black one back.

Just then, two new people entered the room. Even without looking, the copy knew they were Suzu and Ryutarou. Grinning wickedly, it decided to show these new spectators just how unsightly Tio really was. It believed that by divulging Tio's secrets to others, it would corner her further.

"Dragonmen aren't really men. They're evolved from monsters."

Those words had spelled the end of the golden age of dragonmen. Suzu and Ryutarou both looked up in surprise, something both Tio and the copy noticed. The copy's grin grew wider, and it continued recounting the tragedy of Tio's people.

"Who knows when their vicious nature will rear its ugly head? They pretend to be protectors of the world, but behind that mask, the truth is they just want to rule over other races."

The copy looked derisively down at Tio. It was true that throughout all of Tortus, it was only dragonmen who could transform into beasts. Their dragon forms, so removed from a normal human's appearance, could certainly be considered monstrous. Add to that their overwhelming strength, it was hardly surprising that other races started to believe such insidious words.

But even so, despite the wicked rumors spread by the gods, the dragonmen remained noble. They showed kindness to all races and continued to grow their paradise. Their centuries of altruism should have been enough to earn them the trust of their peers. And yet—

"Their real goal is to overthrow the gods. That's right, dragonmen are... heretics!"

Those few words had been enough to overturn all the trust and goodwill dragonmen had built up. The common people had betrayed them so easily. It was like a nightmare. The other races' respect had turned to fear. Their trust into doubt. Their admiration into scorn.

And then, in the blink of an eye, Tio's country had burned. Her fellow countrymen had been slaughtered, and her father Kharga and her mother Orna's bodies desecrated. By the same people they'd risked their lives to protect and care for. The copy's white breath pushed

Tio's black breath a few more inches backward. Slowly but surely, the white light of annihilation was closing in on her. The copy cackled.

"Fufufu, I can feel it. Your anger and your hatred, your fear and your resignation. Even after all these centuries, you still cannot forget the tragedy befell you. You and your brethren were betrayed by the very people you saved. They sneered as they killed your friends and family, desecrating their corpses for sport."

"....."

Tio remained silent as her copy's words echoed through the room. Suzu and Ryutarou, on the other hand, seemed stricken by the copy's tale. The two of them hadn't known about Tio's past. All they knew was that the dragonmen were supposed to be an extinct race. But they'd never realized those few paragraphs they'd read about dragonmen history in the royal library hid such tragedy.

The two of them knew nothing about this side of Tio. And there was yet another side of Tio that not even Hajime and the others were aware of.

"Say, it must have felt nice, right? Blasting the church to pieces? After all, they were the ones who spearheaded that betrayal, centuries ago. Was it not exhilarating to finally be able to slaughter your hated foe?"

Tio was lucky she could use saving Hajime as an excuse to destroy the church. After all, it wouldn't have looked very good if she'd said the reason she'd massacred all those people was for revenge. She was lucky Aiko had been there with her too. Aiko's own struggles with what she'd done had been a good way to divert attention away from Tio.

She'd been able to destroy the church, and gotten away with it without question. Naturally, Suzu and Ryutarou were shocked to discover just how deep Tio's hatred ran, and how calculating she really was. They expected Tio to retort back against her copy, but she didn't. Her silence was like a tacit confirmation that it was speaking the truth.

The copy's claims were further bolstered by the fact that Tio's breath continued growing weaker, to the point where she was at risk of being swallowed up by her copy's. Elated, the copy continued revealing all of Tio's dark secrets.

"The real reason you initially joined Hajime Nagumo's party was because you believed you could use him, was it not?"

Hajime's strength had been abnormal. Tio knew he'd eventually catch the gods' attention. And they were the ones who'd orchestrated the whole betrayal.

"You knew that if the gods bared their fangs at Hajime Nagumo, he wouldn't hesitate to fight back. Meaning he'd make for the perfect

pawn to carry out your revenge. Isn't that right?"

Considering how Tio normally acted around Hajime, it was impossible to believe she'd been harboring such dark thoughts. However, the copy's words were the truth. Even if those feelings had been slight enough that Tio hadn't been aware of them, somewhere deep in her heart, she had indeed thought such things.

Suzu and Ryutarou couldn't believe that the masochistic woman who occasionally acted like a kind and dependable older sister had such a side to her. As they watched on in stunned silence, Tio finally turned toward them. There was no emotion in her expression. There was no cheerful smile, no kind twinkle in her eyes, no wisdom, nothing. Suzu and Ryutarou gasped.

"Humans, beastmen, demons, and gods. You hate all of them for destroying everything you held dear."

500 years hadn't been nearly enough time to quench the dark fires of hatred that burned in the depths of Tio's heart. And now her copy was fanning the flames.

"But there is nothing wrong with that hatred of yours. In fact, we have every right to thirst for revenge!"

The copy's words resonated with Tio. A part of her wanted to agree with her copy. But another part of her wanted to deny her desire for revenge. Her mother and father had always taught her to be kind to others, and to take the noble path regardless of what the rest of the world chose to do. The last thing she wanted to do was to betray their memory.

Aware of the conflict inside Tio, the copy grinned and held out a hand to Tio, its other hand still unleashing its breath.

"Take my hand. Together we can complete our revenge. There's no need to hide the hatred smoldering within your heart. If I'm with you, your conscience will no longer dull the fangs of your malice. I can help you guide Hajime Nagumo down the path you desire. After all, that man thinks fondly of us. Manipulating him will be easy."

The copy's invitation was the kindling needed to transform the fire of Tio's hatred into a raging inferno. Rather than try to break Tio's spirit with caustic words, the copy had instead opted to try and lure her in with honeyed promises. It was the same tactic Ryutarou's copy had used. If Tio took her copy's hand, it was doubtful that she'd still be the same person.

At the very least, it would be impossible for Hajime and the others to maintain the same relationship with a Tio who was determined to get her comrades to join her on a decide crusade.

The copy's white breath grew even more powerful, and Tio's weakened breath could barely keep it at bay. Its wavering light seemed to reflect the wavering of Tio's heart.

“Tio-san, don’t listen to its bullshit!”

“Go back to being the Tio-san we know and love!”

Ryutarou and Suzu shouted at Tio, their voices tinged with desperation. They were doing their best to support her the way she’d supported them. The copy’s burning hot white breath was inches from Tio’s face now. At this rate, her options would be to either be blown away by the breath, or accept her copy’s proposal and become an avatar of vengeance.

If she chose the latter option, it was obvious Suzu and Ryutarou, witnesses to her dark pact, wouldn’t be allowed to leave alive.

But Suzu and Ryutarou weren’t at all worried about their own lives. They just didn’t want to see the dependable older sister of the party who’d helped push them along fall to the dark side. They much preferred the smiling, cheerful Tio who was always clinging to Hajime than the expressionless Tio they were seeing now. In fact, if Tio wasn’t going to listen to them, they were prepared to fight her copy themselves.

But just as they were preparing themselves to fight, Suzu and Ryutarou noticed something. The look in her eyes had changed. There was a hint of gentle kindness glimmering in her pupils, and her lips were slightly upturned into a smile. Even though she said nothing, Suzu and Ryutarou knew. They didn’t need to worry. They could just sit tight and watch.

Tio then turned back to her copy and said, “We have yet to learn our purpose in this world.”

Her voice was quiet. In fact, it sounded more like she was talking to herself than her copy.

“Is this body man or beast? If all things were made with a purpose, then the answer to that question must lie somewhere.”

“Those words...”

The copy’s eyes widened in surprise. Its surprise grew even greater when it realized its breath was no longer beating out Tio’s.

“For centuries we have been unable to find the answer. In which case, it is time we decided on an answer for ourselves!”

“Ngh, my power is... Impossible! What caused you to—?”

The copy glanced over at the two spectators, but then looked in front of her again and saw that her breath was the one being pushed back now. Black was encroaching on white, its dark luster filling the room. The speed of its advance accelerated, shredding through the copy’s breath. It couldn’t understand what was going on. It was certain it had been chipping away at the cracks in Tio’s heart. And indeed, until a few seconds ago, it had been the one growing stronger as Tio’s negative emotions overwhelmed her.

Yet now it was being utterly overwhelmed. As it watched in

disbelief, Tio shouted over the roar of her breath, “A dragon’s eyes see the truth, piercing all lies and deceit!”

Perhaps they were the eyes of a beast, but their purpose was not to strike fear in the hearts of others. They were a symbol of wisdom, meant to see through the mists that misled people.

“A dragon’s talons tear through fortresses, striking down the evil sequestered within!”

So long as Tio had people to protect, she would strike down anything in her path. But she would only raise her talons to fight against evil.

“A dragon’s fangs shred through one’s own weakness, biting through hatred and wrath.”

It was precisely because dragonmen could transform into dragons that they needed to be strict with themselves. If ever they wavered, it was their duty to bare their fangs at their own soul. A dragonman’s pride lay in never letting hatred or anger control their actions.

“For once a dragon loses its benevolence, it is naught more than a beast.”

If the time ever came that Tio lost herself and used her power to hurt the innocent, she would admit that dragonmen were nothing more than beasts. But only then.

“So long as the blade of reason is my weapon—”

Tio narrowed her eyes. Her golden irises gave off a dazzling radiance. Her gaze pierced through her copy.

“Then we are not beasts, but dragonmen!”

Tio Klarus roared, howling her identity to the world. At the same time, an invisible wave of pressure emanated from her.

It wasn’t mana, nor was it the overwhelming bloodlust Hajime occasionally unleashed. It was the same noble, yet intimidating pressure Tio had unleashed when she’d annihilated the cathedral on the Divine Mountain. It was the majesty of a ruler, the weight of royalty.

“Impossible... You mastered yourself?”

The copy couldn’t believe what it was seeing. Without any impetus to bolster her, Tio had almost effortlessly rallied her spirit. That could mean only one thing.

Tio had full control over her mental state at all times. The copy hadn’t been reading Tio’s thoughts. She had been *letting* it read them. And only the ones she wanted to show.

From the very start, Tio had possessed such mastery over herself that she’d deceived even the labyrinth. If Hajime and the others were overpowered when it came to fighting prowess, then Tio was overpowered when it came to mental strength.

“Spirit of this labyrinth. I thank you. Thanks to your trial, I know

that I can remain in control even in the face of ancient magic. Hopefully, this means I will be able to handle even the gods.”

“So you used this entire trial as an experiment... to see if you were capable of resisting the gods’ pull. No, not just that. You wanted to see if you could deceive even the gods...”

“Of course, I also wished to hear my own deepest desires from an objective perspective. A person’s heart is as vast and deep as an ocean. It was entirely possible I may have let some cracks slip in unnoticed. This proved a very enlightening trial.”

From the very beginning, Tio’s copy had been dancing in the palm of her hand. Retreating, it shook its head in disbelief. It needed to come up with a plan fast, or Tio’s breath would overwhelm it.

“Yet, my words were not lies. You truly do harbor hatred and anger in your heart, so how is it you can control yourself so perfectly despite those feelings burning within you?”

Tio closed her eyes in response. The sleeves of her kimono and her long black hair fluttered as a torrential whirlwind of mana formed around her. In that moment, she looked indescribably beautiful.

Had Hajime been present, even he would have been captivated by her appearance, regardless of whether or not Yue was also there. When Tio finally spoke, her words rang with the solemn splendor of a great empress.

“It appears you underestimated me. Who do you think I am?”

“Never forget the dark fire born in your heart on this day, but never forget the pride you hold dear as a member of the Klarus line, either. Live strong, Tio.”

Those were the final words Tio’s father, Kharga Klarus had told Tio before going off to die. As he’d asked, she’d lived while holding her hatred, her anger, her ugly emotions as close to her heart as she held her pride and conscience. With the oath she’d taken as a member of the dragonmen race her supporting pillar.

Everything she’d been entrusted, everything she’d inherited, was still with her. And those things had fused together to create an unbreakable core that formed her will.

That was why she could hold her head high and say, “I am Tio Klarus, proud descendant of the Klarus line and a noble dragonman!”

Because she was Tio, she would never break. No matter how deep her hatred, it would never be the only thing filling her heart. That was all there was to it.

The copy fell silent. It smiled faintly in resignation as if it knew there was no point in fighting any longer.

Calmly, Tio added, “The fangs of revenge are worthless. The only truly strong fangs are those belonging to a dragon. Allow me to show you.”

Tio's breath pulsed, then expanded to dozens of times its size. It then blasted through the copy's puny white breath, swallowing it whole. In the moment it did so, Tio's breath looked like the open jaws of a ferocious dragon.

As the blinding black light of Tio's breath faded away, Suzu and Ryutarou could see that nothing remained where the copy had once stood. They gulped, awed by what they'd just witnessed. It was only when they heard the soft rustling of cloth that they returned to their senses.

Tio swept her long black hair out of her eyes, her black kimono's sleeve fluttering back and forth. She looked calm and aloof. There was no joy in her face at clearing the trial, nor was she overcome by emotion. She'd simply done what she needed to do. Slowly, she walked over to where Suzu and Ryutarou were waiting. Even the way she walked seemed elegant and refined. Not only was she completely unshakable, but she was also a peerless beauty.

"H-Holy crap... I think I might need to start calling her onee-sama too."

"I'm not thinking anything. Nope, not anything at all. Dammit, I can't control my thoughts."

Ryutarou and Suzu were panicking a little. This was a return of the Super Tio who'd appeared back in Haltina's labyrinth to help Kaori and Shea. Not only was she so cool it was kind of creepy, but she was also so dependable it was scary.

In fact, she seemed to have leveled up since then. Suzu and Ryutarou both felt that if they let their guard down, they'd just run into her arms. This time she was so overwhelmingly cool and dependable that it was neither creepy nor scary. Tio had evolved from Super Tio to Super Tio: Empress Edition. Right now, her charisma was enough to charm anyone.

Hearing Suzu and Ryutarou's muttered conversation, Tio smiled gently at the two of them. Their hearts started beating faster.

"My apologies, you two. Though this was all part of my plan, it seems I worried you. However, I appreciated the encouragement. You have my thanks."

"Oh, uh, it was nothing... Uhehehehe."

"Y-Yeah. N-No need to thank us."

Tio cocked her head to the side, wondering why the two of them were so flustered. Unfortunately, the gesture was so cute it caused Suzu and Ryutarou's hearts to skip a beat.

She's normally such a pervert, so how come she can act so cute now!? Ryutarou mentally screamed.

Tio looked behind Suzu and Ryutarou, at the passage they'd come in through.

“Hmm... So the trial rooms are all connected. Are you two the only ones who have met up?”

“I-I think so. We haven’t seen anyone else.”

“I see...” Tio muttered with a somewhat disappointed nod. She seemed oddly lonely. Of course, that only served to make her look sexier. Ryutarou could feel himself blushing. Fortunately, Tio was still a pervert at heart.

“If only Master were here. Surely he would have punished me for harboring such manipulative thoughts. Likely more harshly than ever before... What a waste.”

“That’s our line!”

Suzu and Ryutarou retorted in sync. It really was such a waste that Tio was the way she was. Still, Ryutarou and Suzu were a little bit relieved to have the usual Tio back. Of course, they’d never say that.

Afterward, the three of them headed down the new path that had opened up, with Tio in the lead. Her restoration magic blanketed Suzu and Ryutarou, illuminating the corridor with a soft glow.

“Oh, my apologies. I spent so much time being serious that I accidentally let my emotions slip through a little.”

“A little?”

Once again, Suzu and Ryutarou were in sync. They glared pointedly at Tio.

When she’d been acting serious, Tio’s graceful and noble demeanor had caused their hearts to start pounding faster, so her swap back to her old masochistic self had been even more jarring than usual.

Ryutarou’s glare was especially cold. He felt as though his emotions had just been toyed with by Tio. Even as they glared, Tio’s restoration spell worked its magic and Suzu and Ryutarou were healed completely; even their exhaustion was gone. Their bodies felt lighter than ever. It had only taken a few seconds for Tio to fully heal their relatively serious wounds.

“Wow... but even though your magic’s so amazing... I feel like I can’t praise it because of your personality. Still, thanks, Tio-san.”

“Yeah it feels kinda weird to be thanking a pervert but...thanks.”

“You’re welcome. However, Ryutarou, I take no joy in being insulted by you, so don’t bother. My apologies, but only Master is capable of sending shivers down my spine with his scorn.”

You’re making it sound like I tried to confess to you and just got shot down! Ryutarou seethed internally. He wanted to yell at Tio, but he had a feeling that would just cause a repeat of what had just happened so he held his tongue.

It was both infuriating and impressive how easily and quickly Tio

could swap from a powerful dragon empress to a masochistic pervert. But even more impressive than that was—

“Man, Nagumo’s amazing...”

“I really don’t think you should be praising him for being able to handle Tio-san. If anything, I’m pretty sure Nagumo-kun’s just a sadist.”

Ryutarou was amazed that Hajime had the balls and the magnanimity to deal with Tio, but Suzu saw things differently. As far as she could tell, he was just the right level of callous to deal with a pervert like Tio.

After a few minutes of walking, the party spotted a dead end. It seemed they’d arrived at the next room.

“Hmm, I sense multiple people up ahead. It would seem some of the others have already met up.”

“I hope Nagumo’s one of those people. We need him to take his pet back before she drives me crazy,” Ryutarou muttered.

“Tio-san’s owner, please be beyond this wall.”

Suzu brought her hands together in prayer. That was how badly she wanted Hajime to take Tio off their hands.

Unfortunately, her prayers weren’t going to be answered every time. As the three of them neared the wall, it melted away to reveal—

“Mrrrrrrr! Yue you shneaky little bitch!”

“Shuth up! You shtupid pervert!”

“Jeez! Cut it out already, you two!”

Yue was lying on the floor with Kaori straddling her. The two of them were pulling each other’s cheeks, while Shea stood off to the side, attempting to get them to make up. Sadly, her attempts were futile.

“What’re they doing...?”

“Seriously...”

“This is hardly uncommon. The two are just good friends.”

Tio smiled, but Suzu and Ryutarou sighed in exasperation. Their childhood friend and someone they’d come to highly respect were in the middle of an unsightly catfight. Had they been seriously going at each other Suzu and Ryutarou would have stepped in to stop them, but it was obvious from the way they were pulling at each other’s cheeks and scratching at each other that they weren’t. Even though they’d just been restored to peak condition by Tio, a wave of exhaustion washed over the two of them.

Incidentally, the reason both of them had resorted to such juvenile tactics was because they’d already exhausted all of their mana fighting each other seriously. Noticing the arrival of newcomers, Shea turned to the newly formed entrance.

“Oh? Tio-san? And the people from the hero’s party. Looks like

you all beat your trials. That's great! Look, Yue-san, Kaori-san! Tio-san's here! So stop fighting already and let's get moving! Come on, take your hands off each other's cheeks, and stop slapping each other! Hey, no kicking! Calm down and—"

Despite Shea's entreaty, the kicking, slapping, and pulling continued. Shea had had enough of this tomfoolery.

"I said give it a fucking rest already!"

Running out of patience, Shea punched Kaori and Yue on their heads, using body strengthening to enhance the power of her fist. The force of her blows caused Kaori and Yue to scream out in pain. They cradled their heads and rolled around on the ground in agony.

"Hmm... It seems as though Yue and Shea's positions have reversed ever since we entered this labyrinth. I suppose Yue is being affected by this labyrinth more than most...or perhaps Shea has simply grown that much in this short period," Tio mused to herself as she watched Shea grab Yue and Kaori by the scruff of their necks and drag them toward her.

Her conjecture was spot-on. Shea's growth both in terms of physical prowess and mental fortitude had been explosive. Especially after Hajime had officially accepted her as one of his girlfriends. She was no longer the rambunctious, difficult-to-manage newbie of the party. Now she was every bit as reliable as Yue. As a result, Yue had naturally started letting herself be spoiled by Shea the same way she let herself be spoiled by Hajime.

"Phew... Sorry for making you guys wait. The new passageway's that way. Let's get going, guys."

"I must say, you've grown into quite the reliable leader, Shea."

"Sheashea, you're so cool..."

"It's reassuring knowing you've got our backs, Shea-san."

Tio, Suzu, and Ryutarou showered Shea with praise. Shea's bunny ears perked up and she cocked her head to the side, still holding onto Yue and Kaori. It was a pretty strange sight, seeing the two of them sitting quietly in Shea's arms.

With Shea in the lead, the party headed into the next passage.

"The only people we haven't met up with are Hajime-kun, Shizuku-chan, and Kouki-kun."

"Mmm... Hopefully Hajime's next. I don't want to run into any more duds."

"Are you implying I'm a dud, Yue? Hmmm?"

Kaori and Yue bickered amicably with each other, attempting to pinch each other's cheeks, but being prevented by Shea pulling them apart. All they could do was glare at each other and slap each other's hands. Once they started getting too feisty Shea glared coldly at them, causing them to meekly quiet down.

“You two should at least walk on your own...” Ryutarou muttered, and Suzu and Tio nodded in agreement. Before either of them could retort, they arrived at the dead-end that indicated the entrance to the next room. But instead of hurrying forward, Shea and the others came to a halt. Shea’s ears twitched a few times, and her expression grew troubled.

After a few seconds, her eyes widened in surprise and she exclaimed, “Wha... Th-Those two are—?”

A few seconds later, Yue, Kaori, and Tio also picked up on what was going on beyond the wall and their expressions turned grim. Yue and Kaori extricated themselves from Shea’s arms, and Suzu and Ryutarou exchanged confused glances.

“There’s little point in idling here. Let us go see the situation for ourselves.”

“It’s not a friendly fight like ours are... is it?”

“Mmm... If he’s truly Hajime’s enemy, then I’ll kill him.”

“We’ll find out soon.”

Shea and Tio stepped forward, their expressions grim. Yue looked downright murderous, while Kaori was praying the situation was less serious than it seemed. Unfortunately, Kaori’s prayers weren’t answered. A storm of malice and bloodlust raged beyond the wall of ice. It seemed Hajime and Kouki were in the middle of a true deathmatch.

Chapter III: What Makes a Hero

Kouki Amanogawa. He had been born to average, unassuming parents, but there was one person in his family that he respected greatly, even to this day. His grandfather.

Kouki's grandfather's name was Kanji Amanogawa, and he'd been a famous lawyer back in the day. It had been customary in the Amanogawa family to spend extended holidays at Kanji's house. Since Kanji's wife had passed away at an early age, he lived alone and doted on Kouki whenever he came to visit. Kouki, in turn, grew rather fond of his grandfather.

The thing he liked most as a kid was hearing Kanji's stories about his workdays. During his years as a lawyer, Kanji had accumulated a lot of experience and wisdom, which he passed down to his eager grandson. Of course, he'd summarized his stories for Kouki, both so that his grandson had an easier time understanding the lessons contained within, and also to protect confidential client information. Still, he was a good storyteller, and Kouki had hung on to his every word.

Kanji's stories were always about saving the weak, humbling the strong, and lending a helping hand to those who needed it. The protagonists in his stories always did the right thing and were always fair and impartial. In other words, they were stereotypical heroes. But of course, Kanji's stories were just that. Stories. While they were based on reality, they were embellished to the point of being fairy tales.

However, as far as Kouki was concerned, the true hero was his grandfather. While other kids his age idolized popular fictional heroes like Kamen Rider, Kouki idolized his grandfather. And because Kanji was someone Kouki could actually talk to rather than a fictional character, his admiration for him was that much stronger. Kouki's dream was to one day be like his grandfather.

Naturally, however, the world wasn't like Kanji's stories. Things weren't perfectly split into black and white, and justice didn't always win the day. Lawyers weren't paragons of justice whose ultimate calling was to unveil the truth, but rather legal advocates whose job was to protect their client's interests, regardless of who the client was. Indeed, the very reason Kanji had been such a famous lawyer was because he'd been able to accept both the good and evil that came with his job description and make rational decisions based on the

evidence presented. He'd understood best of all that justice and idealism weren't enough to fight against the dark side of society. Of course, he'd kept the more nuanced details of his job from Kouki, believing that a young child shouldn't be exposed to such truths so early. He'd intended to eventually tell Kouki about his more grim stories once the boy was a bit older.

But unfortunately, he never got the chance. Not long before Kouki was due to start elementary school, Kanji passed away. And his death had a huge impact on Kouki.

It made sense. After all, Kouki's greatest hero had just died. The passing of his beloved grandfather made Kouki immortalize the ideals Kanji had told him about in his heart as a way of honoring his memory. But those ideals were all tinged with childish simplicity, and they allowed no wiggle room for situations that weren't black and white. Worse, the way which Kouki interpreted those ideals meant he would always side with what the majority believed was just, even if that majority was wrong.

Of course, that was hardly a unique mindset. Most children Kouki's age believed in the same simple ideas of right and wrong that he did. However, most other children were eventually given cold, hard doses of reality that contradicted those simple morals they believed in. And after many setbacks and failures, they learned to compromise in their beliefs in order to survive the stormy sea known as life. They realized their ideals were nothing more than ideals, and the heroes they once aspired to be didn't exist.

Most children locked their childish ideals away in a box and learned to face reality. It was part of growing up.

The same *should* have happened to Kouki. Had he experienced a normal childhood, he would have ended up perfectly fine.

Unfortunately for Kouki Amanogawa, he was too extraordinary. His superhuman talents allowed him to overcome the wall known as reality. He experienced no failures or setbacks and was always able to get his way through force. He was able to live by the ideals he believed in no matter the situation, and always come out successful.

As a result, Kouki never once doubted the righteousness of his actions. His parents, Shizuku, and his other close friends pointed out the dangers of believing he was always right, but Kouki always brushed their words off. Because of his natural charisma, and the fact that his actions were rooted in moral principles, everyone but those close to him believed Kouki truly was a hero and supported him. However, that sadly served to strengthen Kouki's belief that his friends' warnings weren't worth listening to.

Naturally, not everything he did resulted in positive outcomes. Though he wasn't aware of it, he caused almost as many problems as

he solved. For example, the way he'd caused Shizuku's classmates to get jealous of her.

However, Kouki always interpreted things in a way that favored his worldview, thus allowing him to continue pretending he was always right. These delusions were only possible because the vast majority of people supported and adored him. His popularity made him blind to his shortcomings. No matter how many times his parents or Shizuku warned him, he didn't listen.

Though fundamentally he always tried to do the right thing, Kouki's ideals became warped by their very purity. It was only after being summoned to Tortus that his worldview was finally challenged. Unlike peaceful Japan, Tortus was filled with violence and hatred. More importantly, in this world filled with the supernatural and superhuman, even Kouki's godlike stats weren't enough to make everything go his way. The biggest example of this was when a completely transformed Hajime had saved him and his comrades from the demon and her monsters in the Great Orcus Labyrinth. For the first time in his life, things hadn't gone Kouki's way. In the aftermath of his first-ever failure, the childish nature of his personality was finally revealed to all. Not only that—

“She was stolen from you, wasn't she?”

“No! That's not what...”

Kouki's copy narrowed its crimson eyes and sneered at Kouki. Its hair was gray, and its armor black. Thirty minutes had passed since the start of their battle. Kouki was panting heavily, and sweat cascaded down his brow. But it wasn't his exhaustion that caused him to stumble over his words.

“It's like Shizuku said, Kaori's loved Nagumo from the start... so she wasn't...”

“Who do you think you're fooling? I'm you, remember? I know you better than anyone. Even if you pretended to accept Shizuku's explanation, the truth is you believe she was stolen from you. Hell, you still think you're the one Kaori should marry. You've thought that ever since elementary school. Who cares what kind of run-in she had with Nagumo in middle school, you're the one who's known her longer. Besides, she's meant to be your, the hero's, heroine.”

“Shut up. I-I never thought anything like that! Stop spouting bullshit! You're just another one of the labyrinth's monsters. I won't be deceived by you!”

Eyes bloodshot, Kouki glared at his copy and unleashed a barrage of light slashes at it. It lazily let loose an equivalent barrage of dark slashes to cancel out Kouki's attack. A few of them even overwhelmed Kouki's spell and punched through toward him.

“So you say, but you look pretty shaken up. Man, that legendary

sword is wasted on you. Nagumo even went through all the trouble of honing it, too. Or is that why you don't want to use it? Because the guy you're jealous of made it stronger?"

"That has nothing to do with anything! Besides, I'm not jealous of —"

"Hahaha. You just keep averting your gaze from the truth, huh? Keep this up and I'll only get stronger!"

Sneering, the copy unleashed a Celestial Flash - Shatter. It was clearly more powerful than the last one had been. Shuddering, Kouki dived to the side just in time. His instincts told him he couldn't neutralize that attack head-on. But his copy launched another barrage of shockwaves at the location he landed, giving him no time to catch his breath. The attacks were getting faster as well, and it took Kouki everything he had to keep dodging.

Meanwhile, the copy continued leisurely poking fun at Kouki.

"You hate how Yue and the others all fawn over Nagumo too, don't you? You think all those cute, strong girls belong with a true hero like you. And you just can't understand why they prefer a guy like Nagumo, who's willing to abandon people he doesn't like."

"Shut up already! Those girls all love Nagumo... and that's their decision... so..."

"Oh, and you hate how strong Nagumo is too. You think all that strength should belong to you, don't you? Hell, you just plain don't like Nagumo."

"You're wrong! Sure I think he's a little selfish, but he's saved my life multiple times... How could I hate him?"

"Are you serious? All those times he saved you, you were jealous. You didn't feel grateful at all. You were just mad because you thought it was your job to swoop in and save everyone."

"That's not true! You're lying!"

"Am I? Then how come my power's still growing?"

His desire to be a hero, his jealousy bordering on hatred for Hajime, and his desire to monopolize Kaori while still wanting other girls to be enamored with him were all things he'd thought somewhere in his heart, but Kouki had truly managed to convince himself he hadn't. He was subconsciously ignoring his own true nature, which was why his copy kept growing in power. And because this was happening subconsciously, he couldn't even stop it. The copy raised its black sword high, gathering pitch-black mana around it. Since it was a direct counterpart to Kouki's Holy Sword, Demon Sword was a fitting name for it.

Grinning, the copy thrust its Demon Sword up toward the heavens. A pillar of black light rose up to the ceiling and burst, transforming into countless dark meteors. They hurtled toward Kouki,

a dark meteor shower of death. Kouki used Flash Step to evade the barrage and desperately searched for an opportunity to launch a counterattack. But his copy showed no openings, and cold sweat started pouring down his back.

To make matters worse, the meteor shower had slight homing capabilities and each meteor unleashed a mana shockwave upon exploding which made avoiding every meteor even more difficult. If he dodged too early, the meteors would follow him and if he dodged too late, the shockwave would catch him.

Thanks to all the improvements Nagumo made, my fake's even— N-No, that's not what I should be thinking. This guy's just strong. Kouki shook his head, banishing those negative thoughts. After all, they weren't the "right" thing to think about someone who'd helped him before.

Unfortunately, though, his conflicting emotions caused him to make a fatal error. He mistimed dodging one of the meteors. Realizing he was about to get hit, Kouki tightened his muscles. He relied on his divine armor to protect him and instead focused on launching a counterattack.

"Ngh! Fly Forth— Celestial Flash - Storm!"

Celestial Flash - Storm was a Celestial Flash with invisible blades of wind added to it. Furthermore, Kouki had used enough mana to fire off a double-digit number of light slashes. It truly was a storm of flashes. However—

"You're wasting your mana. Gather— Heavenstrum - Shatter!"

The remaining meteors gathered around the copy's sword. The Demon Sword glowed with a malignant black light, and the meteors merged into a single stream. It thrust its sword toward Kouki, sending the beam at his Celestial Flash slashes. It was as if the copy was trying to prove it didn't even need to dodge. Indeed, the difference in strength between it and Kouki was already that great. The copy's black beam obliterated Kouki's Celestial Flash - Storm in an instant.

"Ah!? Provide a bulwark— Divine Armor!"

A veil of white light covered Kouki's armor, and Kouki held his sword in front of him like a shield. A second later, the dark light swallowed him whole.

"Nnnnnngh!"

An immense wall of pressure assaulted Kouki. Though he tried to stand firm, his protective veil of light began to flicker. Heavenstrum was originally a relatively weak spell that covered a large area. But thanks to Hajime's maintenance, Kouki's sword had been restored to its original power. On top of that, the copy's Demon Sword had been powered up even more by Kouki's denial of his negative emotions. Even so, it was quite a surprise that its power was enough to

overcome Kouki's nigh-impregnable armor.

“Gaaaaaah!?”

With a low-pitched whine, the light surrounding Kouki's armor vanished, and Kouki was blown backward by the dark beam.

“Bwah!”

He felt as though he'd just been pummeled by a heavyweight boxer. He rolled across the ground, coughing up blood as he came to a stop.

“You wanna beat Nagumo, don’t you? You wanna make him kneel in front of you and beg for forgiveness. That way you’ll be able to get Kaori back and make Yue and the others yours. Then you’ll save the world, take your classmates home, and be praised by everyone.”

[illegible]

Ignoring the pain lancing through every inch of his body, Kouki screamed and got to his feet. Entrusting himself to the dark emotions welling up within him, he charged. A spiral of pure white mana rose up from his battered body. Its dazzling radiance filled the room; Kouki had just activated Limit Break. He was being pushed hard enough that he no longer could afford to use it strategically.

Furthermore, he couldn't bear to hear any more of his copy's barbed taunts. He was supposed to be in the right at all times, which was why he absolutely didn't want to accept that he was feeling the things his copy said he was.

Bolstered by his tripled stats, Kouki shot forward in a streak of light. He closed the distance between him and his copy in an instant and swung down his glowing white blade.

“No thanks, I think I’ll keep talking.”

Scoffing, the copy blocked Kouki's Holy Sword with its Demon Sword. The two swords clashed with a thunderous boom, and shockwaves rippled across the ground. However, the copy remained unhurt. Judging by the black aura surrounding it, it too had activated Limit Break.

Kouki's Holy Sword, wreathed in divine light, warred with his copy's Demon Sword, clad in an ominous black aura. He locked eyes with his opponent, and when he saw the disappointment in his copy's eyes, he flicked his wrist in anger. His downward slash transformed into a horizontal cut, aiming directly for his copy's neck. But Kouki's copy blocked even that lightning-fast attack with ease.

“Going straight for the neck, huh? I thought you were against murder?”

“You’re not human!”

Determined to cut down the fake in front of him, Kouki unleashed a flurry of even faster slashes. His sword traveled so fast it left glowing afterimages in its wake. It was easy to see why he was the

hero. His fast and accurate swordsmanship was so overwhelming it was like a storm had descended upon the copy. Everyone would agree he was among the top fighters in this world. But the enemy in front of him was even more powerful. Smiling leisurely, the copy blocked all of Kouki's slashes with ease. It was like it was weaving a barrier with its sword, creating a zone that Kouki couldn't penetrate no matter how hard he tried. Moreover, whenever Kouki showed the slightest opening, it would hit him with a counter. Before long, Kouki's body was covered in numerous small cuts.

"Uwooooooooooooooooooooooh!"

"What's wrong? Shouldn't you tone down the bloodlust a bit, *hero*?"

The copy's teasing infuriated Kouki. And naturally, that made the copy even stronger. Forgetting all about Limit Break's time limit, Kouki lost himself in anger and started slashing at random. His swordwork became sloppy, leaving him more open than before. Sparks flew as his sword collided with his copy's again and again. It regarded him with cold eyes, like a hunter ready to finish off its prey. This time it hit Kouki with the words he most feared, and the ones he wanted to hear the least.

"If this is all you're capable of, you're just gonna get more things stolen from you."

"What!?"

"Stop pretending like you haven't noticed. If I've noticed, that means you have too, right?"

"I don't wanna hear anymore!"

Kouki was determined to stop his copy from speaking another word, no matter the cost. Turning his rage into power, Kouki thrust his sword forward.

"Who do you think Shizuku's been sizing up these past few days?"

"Ah..." Kouki's rage boiled over the tipping point. His mind went blank, and his ears stopped registering sound.

Moving on instinct, Kouki attempted to cast Light Burst, heedless of the fact that he'd get caught up in the blast as well. His copy deftly dodged out of the way with Flash Step and smirked at him again.

"You don't wanna think about it? First Kaori was taken from you, and now Shizuku..."

"Dii!"

"Come now, is that something a hero should be saying? Besides, yelling won't change the fact that Shizuku likes Nagumo more than you. I don't blame her, either. He's saved her a bunch of times, and she's always wanted to be the damsel in distress."

"Raaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

Kouki swung his sword down, his eyes full of hate.

This wasn't possible. It *couldn't* be possible. Kouki denied his copy's words, trying to cut through reality itself. Its power rose exponentially as a result. The aura surrounding the copy's sword flared up, making the light covering Kouki's blade look like a flickering lantern in comparison. It blocked Kouki's haphazard attack with ease, then hit him with a roundhouse kick to the stomach.

"Gaaah!?"

Grunting in pain, Kouki slammed against the wall behind him. Thanks to the mana-absorption ability Hajime had added to Kouki's armor he could remain in Limit Break for longer, but he was burning mana so recklessly that even then his time limit was approaching.

"Don't wanna listen to the truth? Are you going to try and deny Shizuku's feelings too?"

Shaking its head in disappointment, the copy glared coldly down at Kouki. Panting, Kouki used his sword as a crutch to struggle to his knees. His venomous glare ruined his otherwise handsome face.

"That's impossible... Shizuku would never..."

His voice came out as a low, bestial growl. Meanwhile, his copy sounded nonchalant. Though its words were barbed, its tone was almost pleasant.

"Haven't you noticed how much she's been smiling at him, and how often she lets herself pout around him?"

"She does that around everyone."

"How do you explain the looks she shoots Hajime when he's flirting with Yue and Shea then?"

"She's just annoyed... that Nagumo does such indecent things in public..."

"Then why does she give Kaori those guilty looks sometimes?"

"She's just worried about Kaori..."

"Man, you are one stubborn guy. Do you really not want to believe the truth that badly?"

The copy thrust its sword in front of Kouki. Kouki glared daggers at it, but sadly for him, looks couldn't kill. In fact, his anger only served to amuse his copy. But just as the copy was about to finish Kouki off, it muttered "So he's already here," and turned to a section of the wall. Its lips curled up into a wicked grin.

"What perfect timing."

"You think you can look away!?"

Sensing an opening, Kouki thrust at his copy. However, it blocked without even turning back. As Kouki struggled to overpower it, it glanced back and said, "Now then, will you be able to deny reality when it's staring you in the face?"

"What're you saying!?"

A second later, a section of the ice wall crumbled away, revealing

a new passage. Since Kouki had yet to complete his trial, this could mean only one thing. Of course, Kouki was unaware of how the trial rooms were linked, so he gazed curiously at the new passage.

“Looks like he’s not done yet...”

The voice echoing through the room was a familiar one, but also the one Kouki wanted to hear least right now. To make matters worse the scene reflected in his eyes lent credence to his copy’s words. Hajime had just walked out of the passage, carrying Shizuku on his back. His gaze naturally turned to Shizuku, and her expression burned itself into his memory. She was sleeping peacefully with a relaxed smile on her face, her cheek resting against Hajime’s back. Something inside Kouki snapped.

A torrent of pure white light rained down on Hajime. Standing before him was a familiar face. But he’d never seen that familiar face make such an unfamiliar expression. Kouki looked like a demon as he leaped at Hajime, swinging his sword down at him. *Is he so engrossed in his battle that he mistook me for a monster or something? I guess I could just throw Yaegashi in front of me and he’ll come to his senses and stop... No, those eyes don’t look sane.* There was a madness in Kouki’s eyes that made it obvious to Hajime that the hero wasn’t in his right mind.

Sensing that Kouki wouldn’t stop, Hajime leaped back to avoid the blow. A pillar of white light slammed into the ground he’d been standing on a second later. Cracks spread out across the floor. Though they repaired themselves instantly, it was obvious that Kouki had struck Hajime with the intent to kill. Hajime glanced over at Kouki’s copy, who was grinning a short distance away. He then turned back to Shizuku, who mumbled slightly, but remained firmly asleep. He was amazed at her ability to sleep through such a racket. Though her being awake would go a long way to resolving this situation, interrogating Kouki came first. Hajime turned to him and asked, “What the hell do you think you’re doing, Amanogawa?”

Kouki looked down at his sword, which was stuck firmly in the ground. His bangs covered his face, making his expression unreadable.

“You... It...”

“What? I can’t hear you, man. Look, we’re not the enemy here, that guy over there is who—”

“We?”

Kouki jerked his head up, his eyes gleaming ominously from behind his bangs.

“What the fuck is with this us and you bullshit? Shizuku doesn’t belong to you.”

“Stop spouting bullshit and go finish your trial. Your opponent’s over there, not over here.”

Though Hajime's voice was calm, he had a bad feeling about Kouki's current mental state. The hero drew his sword out of the ground and staggered toward Hajime. As expected, Hajime's words weren't getting through to him. Mana rose around Kouki as he prepared to strike again.

"Oh, I'll finish it alright. I'll put an end to everything!"

Kouki's eyes bulged, his pupils burning with insanity. Brimming with hatred and bloodlust, Kouki charged at Hajime. He swung his light-infused sword horizontally, aiming for Hajime's neck.

"Tch. So you've already been corrupted? Moron."

"Shut up! If you just disappear, everything'll go back to normal! Dieeeeeeeeeee!"

Hajime's premonition had been right on the money. Kouki had lost to his copy, and had thereby lost to himself. Hajime swayed to the side, avoiding Kouki's blade. He watched calmly as the sword flew inches past his face. Judging by Kouki's earlier words, and the way that he'd looked at Shizuku, Hajime surmised that his appearance had been the final nail in the coffin to cement Kouki's defeat. *Tch, I came at the worst possible time.*

"Celestial Flash - Eightfold Wings!"

"Whoa."

Using the least amount of movement possible, Hajime dodged the barrage of light slashes.

"Calm down, Amanogawa. If you're not careful you'll kill Yaegashi."

The way Hajime phrased that made it sound like he was holding Shizuku hostage, but what he was saying was just the truth. However, Kouki was incapable of rational thought right now.

"You coward! Release Shizuku at once!"

As expected, Kouki interpreted Hajime's words the wrong way, even though he was the one attacking Shizuku. Enraged, he unleashed another flurry of blows. It was then that the sleeping princess finally awoke. Though she had been exhausted after her trial, it was still impressive how she'd managed to sleep through all of this.

"Mmmmmmm... What's going onnn? Let me sleep for a bit longer..."

"I can't believe you can sleep in a situation like this. You better get up or I'll throw you like a human cannonball."

At this point, even Hajime was a little annoyed by how Shizuku was still half-asleep. He reached back and pinched Shizuku's thigh. If that wasn't enough to wake her up, he'd really throw her. Hopefully, that'd be shocking enough to bring Kouki back to his senses too. However, Hajime was unable to have his fun, as his pinch, fortunately, woke Shizuku up. He brought out his Cross Bits and deployed a cube-shaped barrier. Kouki's sword flashed as his attack dispersed around

the invisible spatial barrier. The thunderous roar that accompanied it alerted Shizuku to the fact that they were in battle, and she hurriedly dropped off of Hajime's back.

"Man, you're one hell of a heavy sleeper."

"I-I am not! It's just that your back was so comfortable that I..."

"Well, whatever. We can debate your sleeping habits later. More importantly, do something about that guy."

Hajime fired two explosive slugs from his Cross Bits to counter Kouki's next spell. The slugs crossed trajectories right in front of Kouki, exploding and sending shockwaves hurtling toward him.

"Wh-What do you mean, 'more importantly'? Wait, what on earth's going on!?"

Tearing up at Hajime's callous treatment of her, Shizuku's expression went from hurt to shocked as she saw what was going on. She couldn't believe it. The person attacking them was Kouki of all people. Her surprise was understandable. After all, she hadn't expected one of her best friends to be trying to kill her.

"It looks like the trial managed to corrupt him. He thinks I'm the root of all evil or something."

"No..."

Shizuku followed Hajime's gaze and saw he was staring at Kouki's copy. The copy was grinning as it watched Hajime defend Kouki's attacks. That was all it took for Shizuku to piece together the situation. Her expression turned grim, and she turned to Kouki.

"Kouki! Don't lose to your copy! You're doing exactly what it wants! Come back to your senses and overcome yourself!"

She watched Kouki with concern in her eyes. Though he was far from perfect he was still a good guy and Shizuku's longtime friend. Furthermore, he was a disciple of the Yaegashi style, and thus part of the Yaegashi family.

This was the first time Shizuku had seen such hatred in Kouki's eyes. She couldn't bear to see him like this. Raising her voice, she did her best to get through to Kouki. However Kouki just smiled, his eyes still full of hate and bloodlust.

"Don't worry. I'll save you, Shizuku."

"Kouki? What are you saying?"

"You've been brainwashed by Nagumo, right? It's fine, you'll go back to normal once I kill him."

Kouki turned from the stunned Shizuku back to Hajime.

"Nagumo, even if you're a former classmate, don't think you can get away with hurting my friends. I'm gonna kill you and free Kaori and the other girls from your brainwashing! Then I'll save the world together with them!"

Shizuku was at a complete loss for words. It was quite possible

Kouki would have ended up like this much sooner had Shizuku not talked to him the night Kaori left to join Hajime's party. The weight of her words had kept him from going berserk. However, she hadn't been able to truly change Kouki's mind, and he'd still harbored some resentment toward Hajime. That was the reason why he'd always argued with Hajime when they were traveling together. Still, Shizuku had kept him from completely cutting ties with Hajime, or trying to take Kaori back by force. At the same time though, that meant it was only because Shizuku had been by his side that he'd remained sane.

Kouki's thought processes and worldview were very childlike. It was understandable, since he'd run into no obstacles he couldn't overcome with his juvenile ideals until now. So it was also natural that he'd be furious that his last female childhood friend had been "NTR'd" from him. He'd barely been able to retain his sanity by continually denying the truths his copy had battered him with, but in the end, he'd been forced to accept reality when he'd seen Shizuku sleeping happily on Hajime's back. Even Kouki wasn't so delusional that he could deny what he was seeing. And once he'd accepted reality, his downward spiral had begun.

Kouki, already overflowing with emotion, had decided to substitute reality with a convenient fantasy. That was the only way he could protect his fragile heart. He'd convinced himself that Hajime Nagumo was a monster who'd brainwashed Kaori and the others, and was a devil who was trying to stop him from saving the world. Shocked by Kouki's wild assertions, Shizuku ground her teeth and tried her best to make him see reason.

"Kouki! Get a hold of yourself! Don't let your copy deceive you!"
"Shizuku..."

Shizuku carefully chose her next words. She spoke softly and kindly, as if she were trying to calm a child throwing a tantrum. She knew that if she messed up, Kouki would end up going past the point of no return.

"Listen, Kouki. I know it's hard to face the ugliest parts of yourself. I almost died myself, so I understand. But if you don't accept your negative emotions and overcome them, you won't be able to advance. If you truly want to save this world, you can't allow yourself to cling to your delusions. Your real enemy is yourself. That grinning, black version of you! Open your eyes, Kouki!"

Shizuku's words echoed through the chamber. The copy didn't move. It seemed interference from comrades was considered a valid part of the trial. But its sneer didn't fade as it looked down at the original it was created from. Hajime silently watched the scene play out from behind Shizuku. The reason he hadn't instantly fought back when attacked was out of consideration for her. Under the watchful

gaze of Shizuku, Hajime, and his copy, Kouki smiled. Though it resembled the charming smile he'd often give girls back in Japan, there was something warped about it.

"Thank you, Shizuku. Thank you for always worrying about me."

"Kouki..."

Hope and sorrow warred within Shizuku.

"I'm truly happy. Even though you've been brainwashed, you're still thinking of me."

"Kouki?"

"It's fine. I'll beat my fake, *and* save you from Nagumo. You won't have to spend any more time with a guy you don't even like. I'll bring you back where you belong, Shizuku."

"....."

Shizuku balled her hands into fists.

Her expression turned flat, and she asked quietly, "Where I belong? What do you mean by that?"

"I see, so you've forgotten even that. Poor thing. Nagumo truly is a monster."

"Answer me, Kouki."

"By my side, of course. That's how it's always been, and that's how it always should be."

Shizuku looked up in exasperation. Dark clouds gathered in her heart, and she breathed out a pained sigh.

"Kouki, do you remember what we talked about on the bridge, that night Kaori left?"

"Yeah, of course I do. You said something about how I can't always assume I'm right, didn't you? Don't worry, I always thought Nagumo was a scoundrel, but thanks to your words I stuck around with him to make sure. And now I know for a fact that he's a filthy traitor."

"No! Kouki, what I was trying to say was—"

"Don't waste your breath, Shizuku. You're brainwashed so you don't realize it, but I'm doing the right thing."

Kouki interrupted Shizuku, disregarding her words. By telling himself everyone was being brainwashed, he had an excuse to fight for his ideal future. Kouki turned to Hajime, his eyes gleaming with dark insanity. His Limit Break, which he'd purposely toned down while talking, came back in full force, and white light erupted all around him.

"Kouki, stop!"

But Shizuku's desperate cry didn't reach her childhood friend. Kouki rushed forward, leaving a trail of light in his wake. He didn't even spare Shizuku a second glance. His gaze was fixated solely on Hajime, his sworn enemy. Shizuku's attempts at persuasion had failed.

The copy's grin grew wider, and Hajime clicked his tongue in annoyance. The emotion drained from his eyes, replaced by a cold, calm stare.

Shizuku paled as she watched the change in Hajime's expression. A deathmatch between the two of them was the worst possible outcome.

"Wait, I can stop him!"

Under the effects of his Limit Break, Kouki's stats beat out Shizuku's by a fair margin. It was unlikely she could stop him, and attempting to do so would only end with her getting hurt. Still, she couldn't bear to see two people she cared about try to kill each other. She pushed her exhausted body into action and jumped in between Hajime and Kouki.

"Yaegashi, to your right."

"Huh? Ah!?"

Though she was confused, Shizuku's body moved on reflex. She lifted her katana to her right and turned around. Kouki's copy was running straight at her. A shiver ran down her spine and she prepared for impact, but before the copy's sword reached her, a familiar object wedged its way in between them. One of Hajime's Cross Bits. It glowed crimson, indicating that it had Diamond Skin active. It was there to cushion the force of the copy's blow, making it easier for Shizuku to block. Unfortunately, the copy had been strengthened beyond belief thanks to Kouki's weakness.

"Ngh!"

Groaning in pain, Shizuku was blown away by Kouki's copy. Wisps of black mana trailed behind the copy, filling the space between Kouki and Hajime. Kouki swung his sword down at Hajime with enough force to split a boulder. But Hajime blocked it with an azantium-coated Donner. As a sharp metallic clang rang out, Hajime heard Kouki's copy say, "I'll keep Shizuku company. You focus on your hated foe."

Shizuku narrowed her eyes and shouted, "Ngh, you little— Get away from me! I don't have time to waste on you!"

"Give it up. That guy can't see anything but Hajime Nagumo. This trial's between him and Hajime now. Don't interfere."

"Don't just go deciding that on your own!"

It seemed the copy had decided to use Hajime for Kouki's trial. This was now a test to see whether or not Kouki would be able to calm his rage and accept reality for what it was. The copy was content to see how the fight between the two of them played out. Annoyed at being used as a trial examiner, Hajime glanced over at where Shizuku and Kouki's copy were dueling.

"You sure you wanna fight me? Your precious childhood friend's

under attack.”

“That fake’s a part of me. It won’t kill her. And roughing her up a bit will teach her not to get brainwashed by scum like you again.”

“Didn’t you call it a monster earlier?”

“It’s a monster with my personality copied into it, isn’t it? In that case, even if it is a monster it won’t kill Shizuku.”

“That doesn’t make any sense at all.”

Kouki truly was the master of interpreting reality in the most convenient way possible. Though he’d just disavowed his copy by claiming it was a monster, he also believed it wouldn’t hurt Shizuku *because* it was his copy. That logical inconsistency didn’t seem to bother him one bit, though. In fact, regardless of rhyme or reason, Kouki seemed to have convinced himself that really was the truth. He put even more force into his blade, trying to cut right through Donner. But even with his Limit Break-enhanced stats, he was unable to make Hajime budge. It was like he was facing a fortress of steel. Furious, he shouted, “Prepare yourself. I won’t let you have your way with Kaori, or Yue, or anyone else anymore! I’ll free them all from your tyranny!”

Kouki flicked his wrist and turned his overhead slash into a horizontal one. He aimed for Hajime’s neck without hesitation. But of course, Hajime blocked the blow with ease. This time with Donner’s muzzle.

“Wha!?”

Kouki yelped in surprise, and Hajime brought his face closer to the hero’s. He glared coldly into Kouki’s eyes and said, “When you’re this stupid, there’s no point in even pointing out your stupidity. But let me say just one thing. Who do you think you are, saying Yue’s name without honorifics? You bastard.”

“Ah!?”

Hajime unleashed his bloodlust, letting it cascade over Kouki in waves. The pressure Hajime emitted was so immense, he could hardly be considered human. In the face of such overwhelming, monstrous might, Kouki stiffened.

There was a loud boom as Hajime pulled the trigger, and his railgun-accelerated bullet knocked Kouki’s sword away as if it were no more than a plastic toy. Kouki’s wrist was unable to withstand the impact, and he was forced to let go. His Holy Sword spun through the air. Before he even had time to register what had happened, Hajime hit him with a powerful front kick.

“Gaah!?”

His bones let out an ominous *crack* and Kouki shot backward at unbelievable speed. Hajime chased after him and followed up with a roundhouse kick. Kouki felt as though he’d been run over by a truck as he changed directions from backward to sideways. He was traveling

so fast he didn't fall downwards at all, like a human bullet. With no way to stop himself, all he could do was cover the back of his head as a protective measure. That small measure was what saved him from falling unconscious as he crashed into the ice wall with enough force to pulverize it.

Still, he'd taken a significant amount of damage. Kouki coughed up blood as he struggled to all fours. Even though he was wearing the strongest armor in Heiligh and using Limit Break, he'd been nearly taken out of commission by a kick from Hajime. On top of that, Hajime hadn't even activated his Limit Break. Kouki ground his teeth, frustrated by the difference in strength between them. But of course, Hajime wasn't going to give him any time to wallow in regret.

Before Kouki could get to his feet, another loud boom echoed throughout the room. Two streaks of red light shot toward him. But Kouki managed to sense the attacks coming and rolled to the side. Unfortunately, that wasn't enough. Hajime had fired a third shot in the direction he'd predicted Kouki would roll, and it clipped his shoulder as he struggled to his feet. Pain lanced through him, but Kouki had no time to register it.

That last bullet was way faster! Indeed, Hajime's third bullet had been magnitudes faster than his first two. The reason for that was simple. Hajime had wrapped his first two shots in mana to make it look as though he'd accelerated them with Lightning Field, but in truth, he'd only accelerated the third shot. And the reason he'd fired two normal shots was so— "Gaaaah!?" they'd ricochet off the ice wall instead of destroying it. By utilizing the uneven terrain, Hajime had accurately bounced his bullets so they'd pierce through the gaps in Kouki's armor and shatter one of his kneecaps.

"Ngh! Come, Holy Sword!"

Lying on the ground, bleeding from his leg and shoulder, Kouki nevertheless called out to his Holy Sword. It answered his summons and flew to his outstretched hand. But of course, it flew in a straight line. Meaning before it could reach Kouki's hand, Hajime intercepted it and pinned it under his boot. Whether out of loyalty or just because it was designed to, the sword struggled underneath Hajime's foot, straining to reach its master. However, Hajime's foot didn't budge in the slightest.

"Pathetic. Why don't you use the extra features I added to your equipment? You'd put up more of a fight that way at least."

There was no disdain in Hajime's voice. He was just calmly stating the truth. But that calm analysis of reality pissed Kouki off even more, and his hatred burned fiercer than ever. There was nothing resembling the old, charismatic Kouki that had once existed in his expression. The man who'd condemned murder more than anyone now resembled

nothing more than a crazed murderer. Hajime leaned down and pressed Donner against Kouki's forehead. Like Kouki, he was emanating enough bloodlust to cause normal people to faint. It was obvious Kouki'd been checkmated. All Hajime had to do was pull the trigger. But a desperate voice called out to him before he could.

"Nagumo-kun, please don't do it! I promise I can bring him back to his senses!"

Even as she fought Kouki's copy, Shizuku pleaded with Hajime to spare Kouki's life. That didn't please the copy one bit.

"Looks like we need to get you off this stage, Shizuku."

"Agh!?"

Because of her desperation, Shizuku had revealed an opening. The copy took full advantage of that and hit her while she was unguarded with a full-power Light Burst. Shizuku stumbled backward, and the copy followed up with a Celestial Flash - Shatter. It seemed the copy had no qualms about using the extra features Hajime had added to its equipment. Before Shizuku could even think about defending herself, Hajime's Cross Bit appeared in front of her. Thanks to Hajime's prompt protection, Shizuku managed to avoid taking serious damage. The copy had, of course, held back to avoid killing Shizuku as well, so the shockwaves from the shatter effect of the Celestial Flash were only strong enough to give her a concussion and knock her out. They also blew her backward, but Hajime's Cross Bit caught her before she hit the wall. It then gently placed her on the ground, leaving her leaning against the wall. It then created a spatial barrier, protecting Shizuku from anything the copy might try to do to her. Smiling, the copy shrugged and turned to Hajime. It pointed its Demon Sword at him and unleashed a barrage of black light. The spiral of black energy was large enough that it'd hit Kouki as well as Hajime. It seemed the copy was planning on burying them both in one go. Hajime spared Shizuku a glance, muttered "God, what a pain," and jumped away. Naturally, he left Kouki where he was.

"Uwaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

With one kneecap smashed Kouki couldn't even stand. Realizing he wouldn't be able to dodge, he screamed and assumed a defensive posture. But just before hitting him, the blast changed trajectory and bent toward Hajime. It seemed the beam was a homing beam. Hajime focused on the input coming from his Demon Eye. In doing so, he was able to see the nucleus of the spell. He fired Donner, shooting the nucleus down with pinpoint accuracy.

The copy didn't seem to mind, though. It appeared its goal had just been to get Hajime away from Kouki. Unconcerned, it turned toward Kouki. Kouki weakly thrust his sword at it, but the copy easily batted it aside and leaned in to whisper in Kouki's ear. It looked like a

devil trying to lead him into temptation. Hajime had no idea what it whispered to Kouki, but once it finished Kouki started glancing back and forth between Hajime and the copy, his eyes bloodshot. Then, as if resigned, he nodded. A second later, the copy's outline began to blur, and it started fading away. Motes of black light rose up from it and started circling Kouki.

"Now then, it's time we truly became a hero. Let's strike down evil and save our beloved heroines!"

"Shut up! I don't take orders from you! I'm just using your powers to defeat Nagumo. Once he's gone, you're next!"

The copy grinned. It then turned entirely into black particles and went inside Kouki. A second later, Kouki's body began to throb. It throbbed so loudly the noise echoed through the room, and streaks of black started appearing in the white light surrounding him. It was like drops of ink had been spilled in a pool of milk. Kouki staggered to his feet. His shoulder and knee had been completely healed.

"How long are you gonna make me wait?"

Surprisingly, Hajime had waited like a good villain for Kouki to complete his hero transformation. But now he'd gotten tired of standing around and he fired Donner and Schlag at Kouki. That wasn't all, either. At the same time he pulled the trigger, he also lobbed a grenade at him. Kouki didn't bother to dodge at all, and streaks of red light punched through his shoulder and leg. The grenade exploded on him as well, dousing him in fire.

"That won't work anymore."

Kouki walked out of the flames, completely unhurt. His voice was trembling in barely suppressed joy. White and black mana flared up from within him, blowing the flames away. One of Kouki's eyes had turned dark crimson, giving him a mismatched look. The damage he'd taken from Hajime's earlier bullets was mostly healed too. It seemed some of Kouki's hero skills, such as Physical Resistance, Advanced Healing, and Shock Absorption had become far stronger with his sudden increase in mana. His hair was also streaked with white now, and a spiderweb of dark crimson veins covered his pure white armor. Most importantly though, he now wielded two swords. His original Holy Sword, and his copy's Demon Sword.

"You two fused?"

"I don't like it, but yeah. It's the only way I can beat you. But I'm taking this guy down next."

"Moron. You've already lost to temptation."

"Bark all you want. You can't beat me anymore. With this new power, I'll take back everything that belongs to me!"

"How the hell haven't you figured it out yet? It's because you're like this that you ended up in this sorry state to begin with."

“Enough talk. Have at you! Overload!”

Kouki's mana ballooned to massive proportions. He'd used Limit Break's only derivative skill, Overload, which multiplied his stats fivefold. That, combined with the fact that he'd fused with his copy meant his stats had passed 10,000. He was just as much of a monster as Hajime now. Kouki raised his twin swords, then vanished.

“Haaaah!”

A second later he reappeared behind Hajime and swung his twin swords down diagonally with a battle cry. He was so fast that Hajime didn't even get to turn around. *I've got him!* A sick sense of satisfaction welled up within Kouki, but then a second later he heard three familiar booms. His swords were blown out of his hands, and something hard hit him in the stomach. The air was driven out of his lungs and he flew backward. Gasping for breath, he somehow managed to right his stance in midair and land safely.

I thought he didn't have enough time to react!? Cradling his stomach, Kouki looked up in confusion. The answer to his question was right in front of him. Donner's muzzle was pointed right at him, though Hajime was still looking forward. It appeared that Hajime had reversed his gun's grip without even looking and accurately sniped Kouki down. In truth, Hajime'd had more than enough time to react. He just hadn't needed to turn around to stop Kouki.

“Don't fuck with me!”

Seething with rage and humiliation, Kouki once again charged Hajime and swung his swords down.

“Celestial Flash - Storm!”

Finally, he started using the abilities Hajime had endowed his sword with. Kouki no longer had any pride left. He'd been reduced to a beast acting purely on rage. Countless blades of wind assailed Hajime from all sides. They were all invisible, attached to the shockwaves of light he'd released. With his upgraded stats, Kouki's Celestial Flash was powerful enough to annihilate an army.

But Hajime just swayed like a leaf in the breeze, dodging the majority of the barrage. The few attacks he couldn't dodge he shot down or deflected with Donner and Schlag. Even if something was invisible, so long as it was magic, Hajime's Demon Eye could see it. Plus thanks to Riftwalk enhancing his senses, he could easily see a way to dodge the storm of wind. Add to that his wealth of experience, training, and rational approach to combat, dodging invisible wind blades was a piece of cake. And since he wasn't focusing his full attention on dodging, that meant he could counterattack. As he dodged, Hajime naturally aligned his guns' sights on Kouki. He fired, and his bullet weaved between hundreds of wind blades to slam into the ground at Kouki's feet. Of course, this was no miss. He'd aimed

there on purpose.

“Whoa!?”

Crimson shockwaves rippled across the ground. The ground bulged underneath Kouki, sending him flying. He managed to stick his sword in the ground to regain his balance, but that left him open. Before he knew it, Hajime was in front of him. He once again ate one of Hajime’s front kicks, and was sent hurtling toward a corner of the room like a pinball.

“Godda—!?”

Kouki didn’t even get a chance to finish cursing. Hajime was already pointing Donner and Schlag at him even as he flew backward. He quickly activated Aerodynamic to get out of the way, but Hajime adjusted his aim and targeted the spot Kouki would end up in. Expression stiffening, Kouki watched in slow-motion as Hajime moved to pull the trigger, but then momentarily hesitated.

Hajime was debating whether to fire, or adjust his aim slightly to go for the head. His instincts told him to put an end to things here and hit Kouki with a lethal shot. But at the same time, he recalled how Shizuku had been pleading with him to spare Kouki’s life. How desperately she’d tried to save her childhood friend. He also thought about how devastated Kaori would be if Shizuku became depressed over Kouki’s death.

Sheesh... Hajime smiled ruefully to himself and pulled the trigger. He fired thrice in quick succession with both revolvers. Unable to change his trajectory, Kouki was showered in bullets. He jerked like a ragdoll as streaks of red light shot through him. Hajime had even taken into account how each bullet would cause Kouki’s body to contort, ensuring each of his shots hit no vitals.

A second later, blood sprayed from Kouki’s numerous wounds and he fell to the ground with a wet thud. From a distance, Kouki looked like a corpse. But it was obvious he wasn’t when he started moving. Using his twin swords as crutches, he staggered to his feet. His shoulders, arms, and legs were bleeding profusely, but in seconds those wounds closed.

“What are you holding back for? Are you looking down on me!?”

Each of Hajime’s shots had been calculated to immobilize Kouki, not kill him. Humiliated, Kouki’s face twisted in rage. Even though he wanted to kill Hajime so badly, Hajime wasn’t even interested in a deathmatch with him. Casually tapping his shoulder with Donner, Hajime replied, “If I kill you, Yaegashi and Kaori’ll be depressed. It’d be way more of a pain to kill you than to just leave you alive. I’ll just beat you to a pulp and let your childhood friends sort you out.”

“Fuck you! I’ll show you what you get for underestimating me!”

Furious, Kouki charged at Hajime again. He hated how Hajime

was more concerned with Shizuku and the others than the opponent right in front of him. He unleashed a flurry of slashes, trying to force Hajime into paying attention to him. Unfortunately, none of them even got close. No matter how powerful Kouki's blows were, no matter how fast he moved, Hajime calmly blocked them all. Rage burned so fiercely in his heart that his body temperature started to rise. His emotions started spiraling so far out of control that his swordwork started getting sloppy as well.

"You—Guys like you always talk like they know everything! But I'm the one who truly understands Kaori and Shizuku! I'm the one who cares about them the most! I'm the one they should be together with! Not you! Not a shitty scumbag like you!"

"You sound like a spoiled brat."

Hajime ducked in between Kouki's slashes and fired Donner at him at point-blank range. Though he still avoided Kouki's vitals, this time he hit him in the torso. However, even that wasn't enough to stop Kouki as he was right now. No matter how badly Hajime damaged Kouki, his overcharged stats allowed him to heal instantly. Kouki really was like a spoiled brat who was just throwing a tantrum because things weren't going his way.

Though he'd long since surpassed his physical limits, Kouki's negative emotions allowed him to squeeze even more power out of his Overload. Now that he'd fused with his copy, whenever his copy grew in power, he did too. Going off of stats alone, Kouki had reached the point where he'd soon eclipse Hajime unless Hajime himself used Limit Break. He was swinging his swords with the same speed and power that Noint had. But even that wasn't enough for him, and his strength continued to grow.

"Uoooooooooooooooooooooooooooooh!"

"....."

Kouki unleashed a bestial howl. On the other hand, Hajime remained silent. Though Kouki ostensibly had the same level of power Noint had, Hajime didn't feel the least bit threatened by him. He didn't unleash a battle cry like he had with Noint, nor did he even bother activating Limit Break. And despite all the power Kouki had at his disposal, he still couldn't hit Hajime. No matter how fast or strong his blows, they couldn't scratch his opponent.

The reason for that was simple. His mental state was in tatters. He was in a berserk rage, consumed by a desire to pound his enemy into a bloody pulp. He'd be hard-pressed to beat anyone in the party as he was right now, let alone Hajime.

While Kouki was whaling away, another section of the wall crumbled away, revealing another passage. Hajime ignored Kouki's enraged slashes and turned to see Yue and the others dash into the

room with grim expressions. It was obvious from their stunned expressions that they couldn't fathom how things had ended up like this. Normally Kouki would have noticed their entrance, but he was so engrossed in fighting Hajime that he didn't.

"It's all because of you! If you weren't here, everything would be perfect! Kaori and Shizuku would have been mine! I would have saved the world! But you ruined everything!"

"....."

"Even though you're a murderer, even though you abandon people without a second thought, how come everyone likes YOU!? It doesn't make sense!"

"So that's why you think I brainwashed everyone?"

"How else do you explain it!? Kaori, Shizuku, Yue, Shea, Tio, they've all been brainwashed by you! I bet you're trying to brainwash Ryutarou and Suzu too, huh!? Well, I won't let you! I'm the hero! I'll save everyone from you and reclaim my rightful place! No one needs you anymore!"

Kouki's screams reverberated through the room. Naturally, Yue, Shea, and Tio's eyes narrowed dangerously when they heard that. Kaori covered her mouth in shock, while Ryutarou and Suzu were speechless. Hajime sighed, and spoke to Yue and the others through telepathy.

"Yue, looks like you guys got through your trials just fine."

"Mmm... They were a piece of cake. Anyway, what's wrong with that moron?"

"He's really mouthing off at you."

There was a tinge of anger in Yue and Shea's telepathic voices. They naturally didn't take kindly to Kouki insulting Hajime and their friends. Especially since Kouki was saying their names without honorifics. Hajime smiled at the two of them and said, "The short version is he lost to his fake and deluded himself into thinking he's right. Now he's taking his misplaced anger out on me. He powered himself up by accepting his fake's offer and fusing with it. If he could just control himself he'd still be able to clear the trial, but... doesn't look like that's happening. Yaegashi tried to persuade him and that's how she ended up."

Hajime knelt Kouki in the stomach and glanced over where Shizuku was resting. Yue and the others followed his gaze.

"Shizuku-chan!"

"She didn't take any direct hits so she should be fine, but can you check up on her for me still, Kaori?"

"O-Of course! Leave it to me!"

Seeing her best friend lying unconscious brought Kaori back to her senses, and she rushed over to Shizuku. It was only then that Kouki

finally realized Yue and the others had entered the room. His eyes widened in surprise, and he put some distance between himself and Hajime. He turned to the newcomers and gave them an insane smile.

“Oh, you’re here guys. Just wait a little longer. I’ll beat the shit out of this guy and free you all.”

His statement was so outrageous that Yue, Shea, and Tio went from being angry to giving him pitying looks.

Ryutarou and Suzu on the other hand, snapped out of their reverie and shouted, “What are you saying, Kouki!? What’s happened to you!? Snap out of it!”

“Get it together, Kouki-kun! Nagumo-kun isn’t your enemy, it’s yourself!”

Instead of being happy that his friends were concerned for him, Kouki’s smile contorted into an angry snarl. As expected, he turned back to Hajime.

“Nagumo. Don’t tell me you already brainwashed Ryutarou and Suzu? Just how low will you stoop? How much do you have to take from me before you’re satisfied!? Oh, I get it now. Eri’s betrayal was your doing too, wasn’t it? I always thought it was strange how suddenly she changed. But if she was brainwashed by you, it all makes sense.”

“No it doesn’t, you idiot.”

“Save your pathetic excuses. I’ll make you pay for your sins.”

“The biggest sin here is that you’re missing your brain.”

Howling, Kouki raised his twin swords. A spiral of black and white mana erupted from them. The shockwaves from the mana alone destroyed the ground near Kouki and the ceiling directly above him. Kouki was gathering his mana to unleash the biggest Divine Wrath of his life.

“You know I’m not gonna wait for you to finish every time, right?”

Exasperated, Hajime took his spatial magic-enchanted bolas out of his Treasure Trove and flung them at Kouki. Because he was in the middle of his incantation Kouki failed to dodge in time. The bolas wrapped around him, trapping him in place. Swords still raised, Kouki shouted, “Fuck! You coward!”

It seemed villains who didn’t wait for the hero’s transformation to finish were cowards. Cursing, Kouki drew out even more mana, attempting to shake off the bolas by force. But even Noint had taken a few seconds to escape from them, so naturally, Hajime had more than enough time to strike. Deciding it was high time he ended this, Hajime brought out his big guns. Literally. He brought a new weapon out of his Treasure Trove. It was painted black with red accents and resembled Schlagen in appearance. However, its barrel was much

larger than Schlagen's. A basketball could easily fit inside it. Crimson mana started gathering near this new gun's muzzle. Once the clump of mana reached critical mass, it started emitting sparks. It was like Hajime had fit a miniature star inside it. The amount of force condensed in that one shot was so great that even Yue and the others shivered.

"Even if you're too stupid to listen to yourself, you should have at least listened to Yaegashi."

The way Hajime spoke, it was as if he was going to kill Kouki here and now.

"Wait, Nagumo-kun!"

"Nagumo, please don't!"

"Nagumo-kun!"

Shizuku—who'd been brought back to consciousness by Kaori—Ryutarou, and Suzu all yelled at Hajime. But unfortunately, he still pulled the trigger. The air trembled, and crimson light filled the room. This new gun of Hajime's had as much firepower as a sci-fi spaceship's main cannon. Even as the wall of destructive light bore down on Kouki, the hatred didn't leave his expression.

"If only you weren't here, I'd—"

The light swallowed him before he could finish that thought. Shizuku, Kaori, Ryutarou, and Suzu watched on in horror. The blast from Hajime's gun was so quiet you could have heard a pin drop in the room. And just as there was no sound, there was no destruction either. The light dyed the clear ice walls crimson without harming them, creating a room of scintillating garnets. The sight was so beautiful that it was hard to believe it had eradicated Kouki from existence. Probably because it hadn't.

"Agh..."

Kouki groaned softly, a huge change from the childish insults he'd been spewing seconds ago. Shizuku and the others looked up in confusion. The light dissipated, revealing a perfectly unhurt Kouki. He slumped in exhaustion, and had Hajime's bolas not kept him fixed in place, he would likely have collapsed to the ground. There was no mana surrounding him anymore.

"What just happened?" Ryutarou muttered, voicing everyone's thoughts. The answer was simple. Hajime's new weapon, the magic cannon Grentzen, was an Artifact that fired shots of pure mana, with no physical component. Back in the Sunken Ruins of Melusine, he'd run into illusions of the past that could only be hurt by magic, so he'd created this weapon just in case a similar situation popped up again. He just hadn't had any need to use it until now. Grentzen's magic bullets were made of a combination of spirit and evolution magic, and they forcibly stripped the mana out of anything they came into

contact with. Meaning that Hajime had just blown Kouki's fake right out of him, as well as all of his mana.

Though Suzu didn't understand the mechanics of what had just happened, she sighed in relief as she realized Hajime had rendered Kouki powerless without hurting him. Ryutarou gave Hajime a grateful nod of the head while Kaori smiled happily, and tears of joy welled up in Shizuku's eyes. In a hoarse voice, Kouki muttered, "M-My power's gone... No! I still haven't gotten anything back yet! I can't stop here."

Kouki let go of his swords, and they fell to the ground with a clang. It was obvious from how his hands were shaking that he didn't even have the strength left to hold them. After a few seconds, the Demon Sword Kouki had inherited from his copy faded away, proving the copy itself had been destroyed. Kouki's eye and hair returned to their normal color as well.

Seeing that the copy was truly gone, Hajime released Kouki from his bolas. The hero slumped to the ground and muttered deliriously, "I need to turn everything back to normal." He groped blindly with his hands, searching for his Holy Sword. His eyes were unfocused, and it was clear he was barely hanging on to consciousness. However, the hatred burning within them hadn't diminished in the slightest. Humiliated and brimming with jealousy, Kouki had become fixated on the time in his life where everything had gone as he wanted. Hajime put Grentzen back in his Treasure Trove and walked over to Kouki. Seeing Hajime's boots in front of him, Kouki stopped moving. He looked up and said with a ghastly expression, "Please, Nagumo. Give it all back to me. I'm begging you, please just die."

He didn't realize his childhood friends were all staring at him. Their expressions were hard to read, but they didn't seem sad, or angry.

"You've got it all wrong, man. This isn't who you're meant to be. How'd you end up like this, Kouki?"

Ryutarou balled his hands into fists, clenching so hard that his nails drew blood. He'd expressed what all of his friends were thinking. Hajime silently grabbed Kouki by the collar and lifted him up. Kouki struggled weakly, but of course, he was unable to break free. Hajime turned to Kaori and Shizuku. Shizuku silently closed her eyes, indicating that she'd trust in whatever decision he made. Her eyebrows drooped apologetically, which was very much like her. She realized she'd caused Hajime a lot of hassle by asking him to spare Kouki. Kaori, on the other hand, looked directly at Hajime, her faith in him absolute. Sighing, Hajime smiled ruefully. "Fine, fine," he muttered quietly. He turned back to Kouki and balled his right hand—the one that wasn't prosthetic, into a fist.

“Go do your life over, you fucking imbecile.”

He punched Kouki in the face, not using any body strengthening or magic to power himself up. But to Kouki, that punch was even heavier than all the bullets Hajime had fired at him. He flew backward, losing consciousness a few seconds before hitting the ground. Hajime gave Kouki a sidelong glance, then scratched his head and sighed. *I guess I kinda deserved that for thinking I'd use these guys as meat shields against the Noint army.*

Once the fight was over, Yue and the others ran over to Hajime. Or in Yue's case, flew into his arms using gravity magic. Hajime turned to her in surprise, then gave her a gentle smile that was the complete opposite of the grim expression he'd had on until now.

“Mmm... Hajime.”

“Yep, it's me. How'd your trial go, Yue? I guess it was pretty hard, huh?”

Yue smiled, glad that Hajime had picked up on her feelings right away. Though it had been more worrying than hard, since now Yue was unsure what the future held. She was embarrassed she'd let such a slight problem rattle her resolve, but Hajime didn't seem bothered at all and hugged her tight. Shea and Kaori knew about Yue's circumstances—Yue had told Kaori while the two had been having their own fight—so they weren't surprised at how spoiled she was acting. Ryutarou, Suzu, Tio, and Shizuku, however, were. Hajime looked over the rest of his party members and nodded.

“Looks like everyone made it out alright. Let's get going, then.”

“Wait, hang on! We still need to heal Kouki-kun!”

Kaori looked down at Kouki, who was lying spread-eagled on the floor. Ryutarou and Suzu nodded in agreement.

“Do we really have to?”

“Yes, we really have to!”

Kaori held her ground, and Ryutarou and Suzu nodded once more. Hajime grimaced, but he didn't stop Kaori from going over to Kouki.

“You said he absorbed his copy, right? I think doing that damaged his soul. It'll take a while to properly cure him.”

He'd pushed himself far past his physical limits by combining Overload and the copy's strengthening, so his body was in just as bad shape as his mind. Of course, his physical injuries could easily be cured with restoration magic, but his spirit was a different matter. A human's spirit was quite fragile, and Kouki had harmed it quite severely by fusing with his copy. If Kaori wasn't careful in repairing it, he could wake up with a completely different personality. In fact, if she failed it was entirely possible he'd turn into a cheery guy who'd say things like, “Sup, everyone! It's a great morning today, isn't it!?”

Hahahahahaha!”

As Kaori explained all this to Hajime, his expression grew more and more reluctant. He unconsciously hugged Yue tighter, which she was of course perfectly fine with.

“Whatever you do, just don’t heal him fully. As long as his life’s not in danger that’s good enough, right? The last thing I want is him waking up.”

“Huh? Why...? Oh yeah, I guess that might be best.”

Kaori cocked her head in confusion, but then instantly realized what Hajime was getting at. Knitting her brows in worry, Kaori began healing Kouki just enough to avoid permanent damage.

“Hey Nagumo, I realize Kouki tried to kill you and all, but... you know...”

“Nagumo-kun...”

Ryutarou and Suzu, who hadn’t guessed what Hajime’s intentions were, looked unhappy with his decision. They thought Hajime was doing this to spite Kouki because he didn’t like the hero. But at the same time, Kouki had tried to kill Hajime so they couldn’t really argue.

Shizuku on the other hand just watched Kouki with a sad look on her face the entire time. She’d known him the longest out of anyone, and he was practically family to her. In response to Ryutarou and Suzu, Hajime pointed at Kouki. There was no animosity in his expression, just annoyance.

“Look here, think about what a hassle it’ll be to heal him fully.”

“Hassle...? Oh.”

“Looks like you figured it out, Taniguchi. Listen up. Amanogawa failed his trial. He couldn’t bear to face his true self, so he took it out on me. That’s not going to magically change when he wakes up. He’s still gonna be pissed at me.”

“You mean it’ll just be a repeat of what happened here...”

“Exactly. Well, he was being egged on by his copy this time, so it’s possible he won’t go on a rampage the moment he wakes up this time, but still...”

Hajime fished his compass out of his pocket and looked down at it.

“We’re almost there. I’m guessing this was the labyrinth’s last trial, but there’s no guarantee there isn’t something waiting for us at the end. The last thing I want is to be attacked from behind while dealing with the labyrinth’s trials.”

“Haaah... I guess he’s lucky to even be alive.”

Sighing, Ryutarou reluctantly nodded. Hajime’s argument made sense. But like Shizuku, he couldn’t help but be a little sad at how things had turned out. Only Yue was unaffected by the gloomy

atmosphere and smiled blissfully as she rested in Hajime's arms.

"We should just leave him here..."

"That's not good enough, Yue-san. We should finish him off while we have the chance."

Shea hefted Drucken ominously.

"You two... I understand how you feel, but control your rage. Your hatred for Kouki is causing him nightmares."

Tio shooed Shea and Yue away, acting like a reliable older sister for once. Reluctantly, Shea stowed her hammer and Yue dispelled the mini lightning dragon she'd summoned. The two of them were still mad that Kouki had dared to attack Hajime. They also hated how he'd used their names without honorifics, but the biggest thing was that he'd been serious about killing Hajime. Kouki groaned painfully in his sleep as the two girls directed their hatred at him. His brow furrowed, and he broke out in a cold sweat. Chances were he was dreaming of being attacked by the vampire and bunny girl duo. Shaking his head, Hajime smiled at the two of them. While he was glad they were angry on his behalf, if Kouki's nightmares destroyed his psyche any further it would defeat the purpose of keeping him alive.

"Tio's right. I went through all the trouble of not killing him, so don't ruin it."

"Mrr... Fine, if you say so, Hajime."

"You lucked out, you damn hero."

Shea spat at Kouki's feet. *Were you always this aggressive?* Hajime thought as he turned to her in surprise. In an attempt to placate Shea, Hajime used his free hand to pat her bunny ears. In seconds, Shea went from gangster Shea back to her normal, mellow self. Yue scooted over a little to make room for Shea, and the bunny girl gladly settled into Hajime's arms. Yue rubbed her head in Hajime's stomach while Shea leaned against his chest. Shea closed her eyes and wrapped her bunny ears around Hajime's neck. Her tail bobbed happily back and forth.

Yue and Shea's fight had ended with the two of them growing closer, but it had also made them more clingy when it came to Hajime. *I guess something pretty big happened during their trials.* Hajime smiled gently and wrapped his arms around both of them. Things had been bad enough when it was just Yue and Hajime flirting, but now that Shea had been added to the mix their flirting was even more diabetes-inducing. Feeling a little left out, Tio sidled over to Hajime as well. After a few seconds of silence, Tio said, "Master, I have a confession to make."

"Hm? What?"

"The truth is, I was using you all this time to get my revenge against the gods!"

Suzu and Ryutarou turned to her in shock. *You're actually gonna tell him that!?*

"Huh? I knew that already though?"

Suzu and Ryutarou turned to Hajime in shock. *You already knew that!?* Hajime and Tio silently looked into each other's eyes. After about ten seconds Tio asked, "What's my punishment?"

"Nothing."

Tio fell to her knees in despair. Suzu and Ryutarou also fell to their knees, but for a different reason. *This really isn't the time for that...* they thought. Suzu decided it was up to her to ask the right questions and turned to Hajime.

"H-Hey, Nagumo-kun. Did you really know that was what Tio-san was thinking?"

"Huh? Course I did."

Hajime went on to explain that Tio had already told him a good amount of her past. There was also the fact that she'd left her village to investigate the heroes who'd been summoned. And when she'd discovered Hajime was stronger than the hero, she'd decided to stick with him instead. Putting the puzzle pieces together had hardly been difficult for Hajime. More than anything though— "Besides, I'd like to think I have an idea of what kind of person Tio is."

After all, Tio Klarus was one of Hajime's precious companions. It was only natural that he'd pay attention to her. He knew just how badly she thirsted for revenge, as well as the fact that she was a trustworthy ally who wouldn't hesitate to give her life for her friends.

"That's part of the reason why I asked you to come during my fight with Noint, you know?"

Hajime's fight with Noint had happened eight thousand meters in the air. If his only goal had been to get Aiko to safety, he could have asked Yue to come up using a teleportation portal. Of course Tio had been free at the time since she was on lookout duty, and Yue's strength was necessary to protect Liliana and the others at the palace, but part of the reason Hajime had chosen Tio was also because he wanted to give her a chance to get back at the church that had ruined her life.

"Master..."

For once, Tio seemed at a loss for words. Her heart welled up with emotion, but she couldn't figure out how to express it. Tio looked so cute that even Suzu blushed, while Ryutarou slapped himself to keep his head clear. He wouldn't be tricked into falling for this pervert a second time.

"Master, may I rest in your arms as well?"

Before Hajime could say anything, Yue and Shea scooted to either side, making space for Tio. Realizing that Tio must have had quite a

difficult trial as well, Hajime just shrugged his shoulders and allowed it. Beaming, Tio nestled into Hajime's arms, in between Yue and Shea. Now there were four people flirting instead of three. The scene was so sickeningly sweet that Ryutarou couldn't bear to look at it. A short distance away, Kaori watched Tio and the others enviously.

"Awww, I missed my chance. Well... I guess this is good enough for Kouki-kun. Hajime-kuuuuuun!"

"Huh? Hey, Kaori! Weren't you the one who said we should heal..."

Kaori fired one last half-assed burst of healing magic at Kouki and then left him to go run into Hajime's arms. She had at least made sure his life wasn't in danger, but that was about it. Kouki twitched a little as Kaori's final bits of healing magic washed over him. Even though Kaori was the one who said healing damaged souls was a delicate business, she hadn't been all too delicate at the end. Shizuku looked worriedly from Kouki to Kaori.

Kaori tried to wedge herself into the group hug as well, but was stymied by Yue. As she ran forward, Yue fired a small pebble at her forehead. This time, however, Kaori would not be deterred. She dodged the missile and squeezed her way in next to Yue. Naturally, this meant that Kaori was in between Yue and Hajime's arm. Yue smiled threateningly at Kaori, who smiled back. As usual, the two girls summoned their illusory stands and glared daggers at each other. Ryutarou and Suzu watched in amazement as the two girls silently warred with each other while also flirting with Hajime. Realizing everyone had forgotten Kouki, Shizuku walked over to make sure his pulse and breathing were normal. Once she confirmed that he was fine, she breathed a sigh of relief.

"Ryutarou. Could you carry Kouki?"

"Sure... I guess Kouki was the only one who didn't succeed. He's gonna be depressed when he wakes up."

Ryutarou's expression clouded over as he hoisted Kouki onto his back. Suzu looked at him, her expression also troubled.

"Yeah... Though we don't know for sure if we succeeded either... Besides, as long as he's alive, he can try again!"

Suzu smiled cheerfully, trying to lighten the mood. Ryutarou shook his head to clear it of negative thoughts and smiled back at her.

"Good point. He fucked up big time, but at least he's alive for us to beat some sense into him. And if he wants to try again, we can just help him out. Like we always have."

"Yep!"

Shizuku smiled as she watched over her two friends. Noticing she was looking at them, Ryutarou and Suzu both thought, *It's because you act like that that everyone calls you the class mom!* Shizuku's smile

quickly turned into a glare, as if she'd read their thoughts, and they quickly started thinking about something else. Sighing, Shizuku glanced over at Hajime and the others and shifted gears. Her trial had already taught her to stop prioritizing others and suppressing her own desires. She'd decided to live for herself now.

Naturally, this meant she no longer felt any shame about staring longingly at Hajime. Tio was the first to notice Shizuku's gaze. Cocking her head quizzically, the dragonman turned toward her. Yue and Kaori were too busy fighting to notice, while Shea was busy trying to calm them down.

Shizuku brought a hand up to her chest, reminding herself of what she'd learned from her trial. She curled her fingers into a fist, and Tio easily guessed what she'd resolved to do.

"Now this is quite interesting... Fufu. Good luck, young lady."

"Huh? Did you say something?"

"Oh, I was simply wishing a troubled young maiden luck in her endeavors."

Hajime was momentarily confused by Tio's response, but then he followed Tio's gaze and saw Shizuku psyching herself up. He realized what was going on right away. It was hard not to, since he'd already heard Shizuku's confession earlier.

"Man, you've gotta be kidding me."

Hajime's gaze met Shizuku's. The moment it did, Shizuku blushed. A second later, her expression became determined, and she walked over. Unaware of her true intentions, Ryutarou and Suzu followed after her. Shizuku stopped beside Hajime, on the opposite side of where Kaori and Yue were still glaring at each other. She was awfully close to him. In fact, she was practically glued to Hajime's left arm, which was currently holding Shea.

It was then that Yue and the others noticed her presence as well. Yue turned around with a questioning look while Shea blinked in surprise. Shizuku locked eyes with Kaori. They shared a look, and Kaori figured everything out. Her eyes widened in surprise. She wasn't surprised by Shizuku's feelings, but rather by the fact that she wasn't hiding them anymore.

Once she'd gotten over her shock, she beamed. Her smile was gentle and kind, filled with understanding and acceptance. It encapsulated everything she felt about Shizuku in one expression. She quietly mouthed, "Good luck" at Shizuku, showing her support. Shizuku nodded and smiled back. She held in the tears of joy that threatened to spill forth and looked hesitantly up at Hajime.

"Nagumo-kun, thank you for saving Kouki."

"All I did was beat him up."

Hajime's tone was curt. It was precisely because he knew

Shizuku's feelings that he didn't really want to deal with her. Unfortunately for him, she wouldn't be deterred. Smiling nervously, she added, "But you didn't kill him. You kept him alive for Kaori's sake, and a little bit for my sake, right? What was it you said before, twenty percent for my sake?"

"Yeah, I guess I did."

Hajime wasn't going to take back his words. But he still seemed unhappy admitting that. His grumpiness helped alleviate Shizuku's nervousness, and she giggled. Yue grumbled to herself as she watched the two of them talk while Shea muttered, "Ah, so it's finally happening."

"I guess you really did protect me like you promised."

"I've got my limits though. I'm not protecting you from everything."

"I know. But thanks to you, we didn't lose our friend. I know he's a huge troublemaker, and a moron, but... he's still like family to me."

Shizuku looked up at Hajime with a mixture of gratitude and sadness, and he shrugged noncommittally. In truth, Hajime had wanted to kill Kouki and be done with it, to prevent him from being a potential threat in the future. But after seeing Kaori and Shizuku's expressions, he'd come to realize sparing Kouki had been the right choice.

At the very least, it would be a lot less hassle dealing with whatever trouble Kouki caused than dealing with two traumatized girls who'd just seen the man they love kill one of their friends.

At the same time, Hajime was both impressed and nonplussed that Shizuku had continued trying to help Kouki even after seeing the radical transformation he'd gone through. *She really is like everyone's mom.* While Ryutarou and the others were disillusioned with Kouki, Shizuku was just sad that things had come to this. Which showed just how much she cared about him. Had any of the people who idolized Kouki, such as his other classmates or the noble ladies in the castle, seen his actions here, they would likely have wanted nothing to do with him ever again. But Suzu, Kaori, Shizuku, and Ryutarou shared a bond with Kouki that went deeper than that. Like Shizuku had said, he was like family. Not just to her, but to all of them.

So if Yaegashi's the mom, does that make Amanogawa the rebellious son? Normally Shizuku would have glared at Hajime for thinking such rude things, but she was too focused on her own concerns at the moment. She took two deep breaths, then looked passionately up at Hajime.

"Thank you for carrying me after my trial as well. It was the first time anyone's ever done that for me, but it felt surprisingly comfortable."

“Says the girl who threatened me into doing it.”

“Uh, well... I suppose I did, but that was the only way you were going to hold me, wasn't it?”

Shizuku blushed to the tips of her ears. Her heart pounded in her chest. It was amazing how different she looked from her usual, aloof self. She gently laid a hand on Hajime's left arm. In truth, she wanted to grab it, but she was too embarrassed to do more than rest her hand on it. She could feel everyone's gazes on her, but she nevertheless gathered her resolve and said in a shaky voice, “A-Anyway, I'm really grateful to you. So here's your reward. A-Also, it's proof that I wasn't joking about what I said before!”

Shizuku went on tiptoes and grabbed Hajime's arm to hold him in place. Then, using No Tempo to keep Hajime from reading her movements, she quickly leaned over and kissed Hajime on the cheek. He felt the soft sensation of her lips press against him. They were hot, and just a little wet, and they warmed him to the soul. The kiss lasted only a second, but it was long enough to convey her feelings to Hajime.



A second later, there was a loud thud behind Shizuku. Ryutarou had been so shocked by her actions that he'd dropped Kouki. In fact, he was so shocked he hadn't even realized that he'd dropped his friend.

Shizuku quickly stepped back, her face burning red. She looked down, too embarrassed to meet anyone's gaze. But then she slapped her cheeks and rallied herself.

Hajime was at a loss for what to do. He knew what he needed to say. Hell, he hadn't even accepted Kaori yet. There was no way he could accept Shizuku's feelings. That being said, he needed to choose his words carefully. Had Kaori looked worried he would have rejected Shizuku outright, but to his surprise, she was smiling. If he dismissed Shizuku's feelings outright, it'd just cause more trouble down the line.

Though Shizuku had no way of guessing Hajime's feelings, she saw him wavering and decided this was her chance. She steeled herself and said, "Yue, Shea, Tio... Kaori. I learned a lot from this trial. It taught me what bad habits I need to fix, and what my true feelings are. I know Nagumo-kun already has Yue and Shea, and I know you love him too, Kaori. I realize this makes me a horrible person. But even so..."

Shizuku trailed off, hesitating, but Kaori smiled and gave her the push she needed.

"It's fine, Shizuku-chan. No one thinks you're a horrible person. Besides, it's not like you can control who you fall in love with. If anything, I'm happy you're finally putting your own desires before other people's, Shizuku-chan."

"Kaori..."

Shizuku had been worried that confessing her feelings would make Kaori upset, so seeing Kaori support her wholeheartedly took a large weight off her shoulders. Yue shrugged her shoulders, then smiled fearlessly. No matter how many new rivals popped up, Yue would fight them all fair and square, like she'd told Kaori. Shea on the other hand just shook her head in resignation, while Tio winked at Shizuku. Shizuku smiled, relieved that she could proceed without stepping on any toes. Holding her head high, she said, "I'm in love with you, Nagumo-kun. And I'll do whatever it takes to make you mine."

Shizuku's smile was like the clear blue sky that came after a storm. Free of worry and utterly captivating. It had the same dazzling radiance as the morning dew on a bright, clear dawn.

"Shizuku-chan, you look super cute right now! Alright, it's finally time to take down the Yue-Shea pair combo by creating our own childhood friend combo!"

“What? Kaori, I’ve barely even... Heh. Well, I suppose that might not be a bad idea. We’ll make Nagumo-kun ours and ours alone.”

“I knew this would happen eventually, Shizuku... I’ll bury you and Kaori both.”

“You can’t do that, Yue-san! Oh, but we can’t let them have Hajime-san all to themselves! We’ll take you head-on, Shizuku-san!”

Yue, Shea, Kaori, and Shizuku all started jostling over Hajime, who was looking forlornly off into the distance. Shizuku hadn’t even bothered waiting for his reply. When he’d tried to say something Kaori had interrupted him and said, “Prepare yourself, Hajime-kun!” Worse, even Shea had added, “You’re going to say no, right? We already know so just stay quiet for once, Hajime-san.”

So now he was sulking by himself. In the end, he knew he wasn’t going to shut down Shizuku so hard she actually gave up, so he decided to just leave it be.

“Hey, Master. I feel as though I’ve been left out of everyone’s conversation. What should I do now that the others have all paired up?”

“Why not start panting over being ignored like you always do?”

Tio started panting. Hajime looked down at the girls in his arms and thought to himself, *I really wish they’d stop arguing over who likes me more.* Ryutarou sighed, half in exasperation half in amazement, as he watched the fight for the Hajimebowl begin.

“I can’t believe even Shizuku fell for him. What’s so good about Nagumo, anyway?”

“Wow, he even won Shizushizu’s heart. Nagumo-kun’s a real Casanova! What if I end up falling for him too? W-Will I spend my nights doing all sorts of naughty things with Onee-sama...? That actually sounds pretty hot.”

“Oi, come back to your senses, Suzu. Don’t leave me alone in this den of insanity.”

Suzu brought a hand to her chin and considered the prospect while Ryutarou sighed yet again. It was then that he finally realized he’d dropped Kouki, and hurriedly picked him back up. He looked from his best friend to Hajime, and muttered quietly, “Hey, Kouki. I kinda get how you feel. I can’t really blame you for getting jealous.”

Of course, Ryutarou knew Kouki wouldn’t be able to hear him. The question was, how would he act once he woke up? If he ended up going on a rampage again, Ryutarou decided he’d be the one to knock some sense into his best friend.

Chapter IV: The Key to the World

“I see... So you used to talk more like a princess, Yue.”

“Huh!?”

Once all the trials had ended, a staircase leading underground had appeared from within the ice tree in the center of the trial room. At the bottom had been a long corridor that the party was currently heading down. Yue had just finished telling Hajime about her trial and subsequent fight with Shea, and that was what he responded with. Surprised, Yue thought, *That’s what you’re bringing up!?*

“Also, your original name was really long.”

“Huh!?”

That’s what you’re bringing up!? she thought again. Shea and the others all looked at Hajime in surprise as well. But Hajime ignored their nonplussed expressions.

“Hey, Yue. Go back to talking like a princess for a bit.”

“Wh-Why?”

“I just wanna hear what you sound like when you’re all formal.”

As usual, Hajime didn’t mince his words.

“You can talk like a princess or a queen or whatever, I just wanna hear it. I know, why don’t you try saying ‘I live to serve the people,’ or something?”

“Mmm... It’s embarrassing, so no.”

Going by her expression, Yue wasn’t lying.

“What about, ‘Hajime-san, you did well to clear this trial. I always believed in you. As a reward, I shall grant you any one thing you desire,’ then?”

“That’s way too long... I don’t wanna.”

Yue turned away in a huff. It was a testament to how embarrassed she was that she was refusing a request from Hajime of all people. Chances were she found it just as bad as Hajime would have if she’d asked him to start talking like he used to in his edgelord days.

I guess when I think of it that way, it’s understandable. Hajime ruffled Yue’s hair affectionately and apologized for teasing her.

Just then, Kaori snuck up behind Yue and said, “Come on Yue, what’s the big deal!? Why don’t you talk like a princess for us? Hey—”

“Die, Kaori...”

“Bwah!”

Yue turned around and punched Kaori in the face. She flew

backward in a tailspin, but then regained her balance faster than anyone thought possible and yelled, "What was that for!?"

Yue ignored her and turned back to Hajime.

"I was being serious too... Stupid Hajime."

Yue was worried that if she truly was more special than she'd realized, that perhaps she'd need to be sealed away again in the future. Of course, thanks to her fight with Shea, she wasn't letting that worry get to her, but it was still a serious topic. Yue pouted, and Hajime smiled wryly at her.

"My bad. But you know, don't you think it's kinda late to be realizing this? If you ask me, the way you used to act when you were a queen was way more interesting."

Yue blinked in surprise, her frown gone.

"Did you already figure it out, Hajime?"

"More or less. I mean, you've got the power to infinitely regenerate. I'm sure your uncle had plenty of ways to drain you of mana, so of course I'd wonder why he chose to seal you away instead of just killing you."

If only you were completely immortal, I wouldn't ever have to worry about you being in danger... Hajime thought with a sigh. He noticed Yue was tearing up and added, "But you know, from what you told me back in the abyss, it was obvious you didn't remember everything. It seemed like the shock of being betrayed was so huge that you just sort of spaced out and before you knew it, you were sealed."

"Mmm..."

"So I figured, rather than try to make you recall all those traumatic memories, it'd be easier if I just got rid of anything that tried to hurt you. It doesn't matter what you really are, I'll still love you, Yue."

Hajime wouldn't hand Yue over to anyone, and he'd kill anyone who tried to take her from him. Regardless of whether the world, or even the gods, wanted Yue dead, Hajime would stand by her. It didn't matter what her circumstances were, Hajime's conviction wouldn't change. A world that made Yue suffer didn't deserve to exist. And anything that hurt her, he'd destroy with extreme prejudice. Hajime's eyes glowed with a bestial ferocity as he told as much to Yue. Even if it meant sacrificing the entire world, Hajime would choose Yue every time.

In the face of such overwhelming love, Yue blushed and looked up at Hajime with longing eyes. She leaned forward and bit Hajime on the neck. Then, after sucking his blood, she moved up to kiss him on the lips.

"Shizuku... What do you think you're doing?"

But before she could, a black sheath blocked her path. Yue turned

to the owner of the sheath, Shizuku, with a glare. Shizuku looked away, flustered. It seemed she'd interrupted them unconsciously, and not intentionally.

"U-Umm... Well, we're still inside a labyrinth and the trial isn't over yet so, you know? Save that kind of stuff for when we're somewhere safe?"

"What are you really thinking?"

"I'm jeal— No, forget it. I just— No, not that either. Public displays of affection are bad. Yeah, that's it."

Considering Shizuku refused to meet Yue's gaze, it was obvious she was lying. Next to her, Kaori shouted happily, "I can't believe you managed to stop Yue... You really are amazing, Shizuku-chan!"

"Says the girl who just kissed me in public a few minutes ago."

Hajime looked over his shoulder at Shizuku, a teasing smile on his face. Shizuku blushed a deep crimson.

"Err, that was, you know, I didn't want to be the only one... who hadn't kissed you," she muttered quietly.

Joining in on the teasing, Tio said, "And yet you settled for a mere peck on the cheek. Swordsmen are supposed to be bold and resolute. You should have taken Master's lips by force if you had to."

"Th-That... would have been wrong. You need the right mood and get consent for stuff like that. Also, I'd prefer it if Nagumo-kun... was the one to initiate."

Shizuku looked down shyly as she said that last bit. She brought her black katana, the gift she'd received from Hajime, back and hugged it to her chest. Almost as if hinting to Hajime that was what she wanted to do to him.

Incidentally, Shizuku had been walking three steps behind Hajime this whole time, matching his pace perfectly. Her ponytail bobbed back and forth as she walked, the hairpin that Hajime had made for her glinting in her hair.

"....."

Hajime stared at Shizuku as though she were some rare animal. Most of the girls who'd fallen for Hajime were extremely aggressive with their affection. Carnivores who would greedily devour Hajime for themselves given the opportunity. So he was pretty surprised that Shizuku was willing to be the passive one here. It reminded him of just how aggressive Yue and the others really were. Seeing Hajime's expression, Yue shivered.

"What unbelievable femininity... Shizuku Yaegashi, you truly are a monster."

As far as Yue was concerned, Shizuku was the girliest out of all of them. Kaori turned to Yue and grinned. She pushed Shizuku forward as if to show her off. At the moment, Shizuku was flustered by

everyone's comments and a far cry from the usual aloof, collected girl she seemed to normally be.

"Mrrr..." Yue groaned and pushed Shea in front of her. Confused as to what was going on, Shea stood there blankly while Yue used wind magic and made her soft ears flop back and forth. She grinned back at Kaori, confident that her protege was just as charming as Shizuku.

It appeared Kaori and Yue's relationship had evolved to the point that they were fighting proxy wars. The two continued doing various things to try and prove that their best friend was the cutest.

As always, Shea ended up being the one to mediate between the two of them. Or rather, try to mediate between them. The two continued arguing like cats and dogs, ignoring Shea's attempts to calm them down. In the end, Shea got so fed up with them that she brought Drucken out and threatened them with it. When they saw her angry smile, Yue and Kaori both froze. After a brief pause, both of them backed off and kept their gazes fixed firmly on the corridor ahead. Everyone else looked at Shea with newfound respect.

Even Hajime was impressed. He thought back to the story Yue told him earlier and said, "But I've gotta say, I'm amazed you were able to fight evenly with Yue when she was being serious. Plus, you deserve a reward for giving her a good scolding when she needed one. What do you want, Shea?"

"Huh? I-I don't need anything."

Shea was definitely the MVP of this labyrinth conquest. Especially since she'd been the one to remind Yue of her own determination. Yue herself seemed to have no objections, and she glared at Shea.

"Mmm... You're the first person to ever slap me, Shea. Not even my parents slapped me before. I'll never forget how much it stung. You deserve a reward for that."

"Is it just me, Yue-san or are you holding a grudge about that? Anyway, I can't think of any special requests. I already have everything I want. I guess a handmade present might be nice? I only yelled at Yue-san because I personally couldn't stand how mopey she was being."

In the past, Shea would have begged for a date, or for Hajime to take her virginity, but there was no need for that anymore. She smiled in satisfaction, looking oddly dignified. This time it was Kaori's turn to be impressed with how charming Shea looked.

"Unbelievable... Shea's already become just as formidable a rival as Yue. In fact, she's even more formidable now. How could I have overlooked this?"

"U-Umm, Kaori? You don't have to make it sound so dramatic."

"Shizuku-chan. We can't just remain underdogs forever. We need

to win our place by Hajime-kun's side and reach that level of fulfillment."

"Err..."

Kaori seemed unhappy with the fact that Shizuku was satisfied with just being able to confess to Hajime. She crossed her arms and put a hand on her chin, trying to analyze ways to win Hajime's heart. Naturally, her eccentric behavior left Shizuku confused.

A second later Kaori's eyes flew open and she declared, "I know! We need to stop considering ourselves challengers and go on the offensive! From now on, we're assaulters!"

"Kaori... I realize you're tired after your trial, but you need to calm down."

"Once this labyrinth's conquered, we need to sneak into Hajime-kun's bed, Shizuku-chan."

"What the hell are you saying!?"

"Don't worry. This trial helped me understand how to utilize this body's full power. I should be able to do something about Yue and Shea."

"We need to do something about your brain first. Cast restoration magic on yourself right now, Kaori."

"I-I realize it'll be a first for both of us... but we can do it if we're together!"

"Maybe I should knock some sense into you like Shea did to Yue."

Shizuku shook her head in exasperation as she watched Kaori clench her fists and work herself up. But imitating Shea wouldn't be easy. Curing Kaori's tendency to charge straight ahead would be a real ordeal.

"Stop acting out a rom-com anime and keep walking, you two."

"How is it that meeting up made everyone even more tired instead of relieved?"

Suzu and Ryutarou complained to Kaori and the others, fed up with their flirting. Chastised, the party resumed walking down the corridor. No monsters or obstacles barred their way, and Hajime was getting optimistic that they'd be able to reach the end without any additional trials. After about ten minutes, they reached a dead end.

The ice wall in front of them had a heptagon-shaped crest carved inside it. Until now, Hajime had seen similar crests engraved somewhere near the end of each labyrinth. They were the personal symbol of each Liberator. As the party approached, the symbol started to glow, and the wall around it was covered in a film of light.

Hajime tentatively touched the glowing wall, causing it to ripple. From the looks of it, this was the glow of a teleportation portal. Hajime turned back to his comrades and nodded to them. Yue and the others nodded back, ready. Hajime gathered his resolve and walked

into the veil of light.

“Looks like we didn’t get separated this time.”

“Mmm... More importantly, look at that.”

“Hrm, it seems we have truly reached the end this time.”

“What a pretty room. That’s... a palace, right?”

As the light faded, Hajime and the others found themselves in a wide-open room. Cylindrical pillars made of ice supported the square-shaped room, which was of course also made of ice. However, this ice was perfectly transparent instead of functioning like a mirror. Most striking of all, though, was the floor. It was filled with water at the center, something the party hadn’t seen at all since entering this labyrinth.

This room was clearly kept at a warmer temperature than everywhere else. The surface of the lake was bubbling, meaning that there was a fountain pumping water in from somewhere. Miniature islands dotted the lake, connected to each other by a series of stepping stones made of ice. Flowers bloomed on the island, and the room looked more like a park than anything. And at the very center of the lake sat a palace. It was solemn and beautiful, its walls engraved with elaborate murals of nature and flowers.

The party felt as though they’d been transported to a fantasy dreamland where parks were made of ice. For a while, the party simply enjoyed the view in stunned silence. But then Hajime took his Air Zone off, and everyone returned to their senses.

“Yeah, it’s not cold anymore. It’s a bit chilly, but honestly, the weather’s nice.”

That could mean only one thing.

“No doubt about it. We’ve made it to the end. This is where Vandre Schnee lived.”

Hajime double-checked his compass just in case, then smiled. Suzu’s eyes welled up with tears.

“We... really did it... Hic...”

She was overcome with emotion. It had taken every ounce of her strength and willpower to get this far. Her reaction was only natural. Shizuku and Ryutarou wore similar expressions as well.

“We beat the labyrinth...”

“Yeah. I thought I was gonna die so many times, but we made it.”

“You wouldn’t have gotten in so many sticky situations if you just stopped to think before charging forward.”

“Haha, I guess. But I mean, I made it, so who cares, right?”

Shizuku gave Ryutarou a chilling glare, but then the two of them smiled at each other and laughed. Suzu joined them as well, and the three friends slapped each other’s backs, feeling a sense of

accomplishment. Kaori, Shea, Tio, and even Yue smiled at the sight. Most surprisingly, Hajime closed his eyes and smiled as well.

“There’s no traps or anything, right Nagumo?”

Ryutarou took a step toward the palace, then thought better of it and turned back to Hajime.

“What, you didn’t enjoy getting turned into a popsicle?”

“C-Can’t we just forget about that? Anyway, even I’m not dumb enough to make the same mistake twice.”

Never again would he suffer the shame of leaving his crotch exposed to his party members. Chuckling as he remembered that incident, Hajime scanned the stepping stones with his Demon Eye and strode forward. He made it to the palace’s island without incident. Right in front of the palace proper was a detailed magic circle. He stepped into it and nothing happened, so he guessed it was the shortcut that would teleport them back to the surface.

The palace itself was constructed of opaque blue ice, a stark contrast to the clear ice that made up the rest of the room. Hajime looked up at the pair of double doors that served as the entrance to the palace. A crest shaped like a snowflake was carved into the center where the two doors’ handles would be. That was Vandre Schnee’s symbol.

Hajime pushed at the doors, and they opened effortlessly. The fact that they didn’t creak was proof that Freid had been here recently.

“Mmm... This looks a lot like Oscar’s house, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah, it does. Though this one’s even bigger and fancier.”

The basic construction of the area was pretty similar to how Oscar’s house had been, though. It was just larger and filled with more unnecessary decorations. Everything from the chandeliers made of ice, to the banisters and room doors were filled with fancy carvings of nature. If Oscar had been someone who believed true beauty lay in simplicity and functionality, then Vandre was clearly the opposite.

Hajime had read in Oscar’s journal that he and Vandre hadn’t really gotten along, and now that Hajime saw Vandre’s house, he could easily imagine the two of them arguing about aesthetics and the like.

I get the feeling they were kind of like... Hajime glanced over at Yue and Kaori. They both gave him questioning looks. He shook his head, indicating that it was nothing, and picked the compass up again. He wanted to know which room had the magic circle that would teach him this labyrinth’s ancient magic.

“Straight ahead, huh?”

Taking the lead, Hajime walked down the hallway, cutting through the center of the first floor. They passed a few rooms on the way, but most of them were simple bedrooms with wooden and metal

furniture. The ice walls were cool to the touch, but weren't actually cold. Much like Hajime's Air Zones, it seemed they'd been enchanted to control the temperature around them. Admiring the palace's craftsmanship, the party arrived in front of a door that was larger and thicker than the rest.

"This has gotta be it."

Hajime pushed the door open without hesitation. And as he expected, the magic circle he was looking for was inside. Suzu and Ryutarou turned excitedly toward Hajime, asking for permission to go in. Seeing no reason to blueball them, Hajime nodded and they all stepped into the circle.

Like always, the labyrinth read through their memories and, those who were deemed worthy, had how to use Vandre's ancient magic poured directly into their brains. Feeling a little dizzy, Suzu, Ryutarou, and Shizuku stumbled as the secrets of metamorphosis magic, the last ancient magic left to learn, poured into their minds. Once the process was over, they turned to each other, smiling. But just then—

"Ngh!? Gaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

"Huh!? Uwaaaaaah!"

Hajime and Yue screamed. Shea and the others looked over to see the two of them on their knees, cradling their heads.

"Hajime-san!? Yue-san!?"

"What happened!? Are you okay!?"

Shea and Shizuku ran over, worried.

"Calm down! Kaori! This is no time to be standing around!"

"Huh? Oh, yeah I'll heal them!"

Shocked by the sudden turn of events, it took Tio's shout to bring Kaori back to her senses. She quickly dashed over and started examining Hajime and Yue.

"Ngh."

"Mmm..."

But before she could do anything, the pain abated and Hajime and Yue slumped, covered in cold sweat. Shea grabbed Hajime and Shizuku grabbed Yue before either of them could hit the ground. From the looks of it, they'd lost consciousness. No one had expected two of the most overpowered members of their party to faint like this, and the others were completely stumped.

"I suppose we should lay them down somewhere for now..."

Calm as always, Tio suggested the most rational next step. Still flustered, Shea and Shizuku nevertheless nodded to each other and started looking for a room to put the two in.

Some time later, Hajime felt something soft on his lips and his consciousness returned to him.

“What’re you doing, Yue?”

“Mmmm? Giving you a wake-up kiss.”

What a wonderful way to be woken up... Hajime kissed Yue back, then looked around him. He was lying in a bed, the walls around him made of familiar ice. It seemed he was still inside Vandre’s palace. Hajime turned back to Yue and looked into her eyes.

“I guess the others carried us here after we collapsed. Yue, do you know where everyone else is?”

“Mmm... Sorry. I just woke up myself so I don’t.”

Hajime had thought she’d woken up a while ago and went to take a look around before she returned to wake him up, but it seemed that wasn’t the case. Yue rubbed her cheek against Hajime’s face, her bare feet flapping up and down.

“How long ago did you wake up, exactly?”

“Mmm... Ten minutes or so?”

“And you’ve been like this the whole time?”

“Mmm... I mean, you were right there when I woke up, Hajime.”

That was the same logic as people who said they climbed mountains simply because they were there. Yue brought her lips toward Hajime, planning to kiss him again. In the corner of Hajime’s vision, he saw another bed. Judging by how its sheets looked like they’d been in use, he guessed Yue had been laid down there. And when she’d woken up, she’d decided sleeping with him was more important than finding out where Shea and the others had gone.

During this trial, she’d been shaken up so badly that Shea had needed to knock some sense into her. Then, when she’d finally been reunited with Hajime, she’d been prevented from getting more physical with him by Shizuku. But now the trial was over, and she’d woken up to find Hajime sleeping soundly next to her. Of course she hadn’t been able to resist.

Man, I have a really cute girlfriend... Entranced by Yue’s charms, Hajime quickly grew more aggressive. Giggling, Yue licked her lips and leaned closer to Hajime.

“Yue. I think it’ll take a bit longer for us to wake up.”

“Mmm... We can tell Shea we’re awake when we finally do wake up.”

Unfortunately for Hajime and Yue—

“Hm? Are you two already awake? Wait, what are you doing!?”

Someone was there to tell them they were already awake. Shea threw the door open and stalked into the room. Her superhuman hearing had picked up on Yue’s voice, and the sound of clothes rustling. The moment she saw what Hajime and Yue were up to, her ears shot straight up. Behind her, Kaori and Shizuku filed into the room.

“Shea? What’s wrong... Hajime-kun? Yue? What do you two think you’re doing?”

“Ah...”

Kaori’s devil-masked stand appeared behind her. Meanwhile, Shizuku turned beet-red and covered her face with her hands. Though, of course, she left a small enough gap between her fingers that she could peek through.

Hajime and Yue exchanged glances, annoyed that they’d been stopped just as they were getting in the mood. In perfect sync, they said, “Come back in two hours.”

Of course, no one was going to listen.

“Are you stupid!?”

“We’re not going anywhere!”

“E-Exercise some self-control, you two.”

Hajime and Yue were yelled at from all sides. Well, Shizuku’s scolding was more of a meek statement than a yell. She was too embarrassed to be properly angry.

Shea flipped the bed they were resting on, forcing them to roll off while Kaori bound them separately using her Binding Chains of Light. Shea then rolled the two of them into the living room, ignoring their protests.

“Hey, what the heck happened?”

“Ah, I think I can guess.”

There was a large wooden table in the living room, surrounded by leather sofas. Ryutarou and Suzu reclined on one of the sofas, sipping cups of tea. Shea hurled Hajime and Yue onto the sofa opposite the two of them.

After seeing their disheveled clothes, Ryutarou was able to figure out what had happened as well. A second later, something flew at his forehead, knocking him backward.

“Bwah!?”

He tumbled over the back of the sofa and fell to the ground.

“Hmph. That’s what you get for ogling Yue.”

“Why are you blaming me!?” Ryutarou complained, nursing his forehead. Even bound by Kaori’s chains, Hajime had enough freedom of movement to flick a rubber bullet at Ryutarou’s head with pinpoint precision. Ryutarou was in the right this time though, as this was no fault of his.

“Mmm... Are you jealous, Hajime? How cute.”

Yue blushed, causing Shea to snap at her.

“Sheesh! You two aren’t reflecting on your actions at all, are you!? Do you have any idea how worried we were!?”

Despite the anger in her voice, Shea’s eyes welled up with tears. She staggered over to Hajime and Yue, who’d already undone their

bonds, and sat down between them. Her bunny ears drooped sadly in front of her. Hajime and Yue finally realized just how worried she'd been about them.

"Shea's right. We really were worried..."

"Yeah. If you were okay, you should have let us know right away."

It seemed Kaori and Shizuku had been worried as well. Like Shea, there were tears in their eyes. Hajime and Yue suddenly felt really guilty. They exchanged an awkward glance, then bowed their heads in apology.

"Uh, my bad, guys. I'm really sorry. When I woke up, Yue was already kissing me, so I forgot about everything else... Yeah, this is all Yue's fault for being too cute."

"Mmm... Sorry. I should have let you know I was fine right away. But Hajime's sleeping face was so cute I couldn't hold back. This is all Hajime's fault for being too cool."

However, their apologies didn't sound anything like a proper apology.

"You two aren't sorry at all, are you?"

"Haaah, oh, who cares. Arguing any more will just make me tired."

"It's painful to watch something like this after I've just confessed..."

Hajime and Yue flirted even as they apologized, and Shea glared at them. Kaori, on the other hand, just sighed in exasperation while Shizuku looked down, daunted by how big an obstacle she needed to surmount. Just then, Tio entered the room.

"Oh, I see you're doing fine, Master. Wonderful. I'm glad to know my concern was unnecessary."

"Ah, Tio-san. Sorry, I forgot to tell you."

Shea turned to Tio and apologized. It seemed Tio had gone to check the palace's library to see what might have made Hajime and Yue collapse. She'd been worried they might not wake back up on their own. When Shea had found Hajime and Yue awake and flirting, she'd been too relieved and angry to remember to tell Tio she didn't need to scour documents anymore.

"No matter. I take it Master and Yue attempted to fornicate the moment they woke up?"

"How'd you guess?"

"Hmph. It was obvious. Were I in Yue's position, I would have done the same! Then Master would have punished me more than ever... Haaah... Haaah..."

"Anyway, what happened to you two, Hajime-kun?"

"It must have been pretty painful if it made you even you guys

scream.”

Ignoring Tio panting in the background, Kaori and Shizuku turned to Hajime. Naturally, Hajime, Yue, and Shea all ignored Tio as well. They rearranged their sitting arrangement so that Tio had nowhere to sit, though. Blushing, Tio sat at Hajime’s feet like it was where she belonged.

“Well, the reason for that is... I guess, simply put, our brains got overheated with information.”

“What do you mean by that?”

Shea cocked her head in confusion.

“Uh, so, when the knowledge of how to use the final ancient magic, metamorphosis magic, reached our brains, we learned how to do something else too. But that knowledge put too much stress on our minds, and we lost consciousness.”

“Hrm... The only thing powerful enough to bring you two to your knees would be... the knowledge of how to use concept magic, correct?”

“Mmm... That’s right. Even though you’re a pervert, you’re so smart, Tio. If only you weren’t a pervert.”

Yue repeated herself, though this was something everyone knew already. Despite her weird fetishes, Tio was a genius. Even if she was sitting at Hajime’s feet, she was the smartest member of the party.

“I’m sure you guys remember, but Lyutillis Haltina’s hologram told us we need to know every single ancient magic to be able to use concept magic. Only Yue and I have cleared every single labyrinth.”

Shea and the others nodded in understanding. It seemed there were no lasting side-effects to obtaining that knowledge, which was a relief. Kaori asked Hajime the question she knew was on everyone’s mind.

“Concept magic... is even stronger than ancient magic and can do anything, right? Does that mean we can go back home to Japan? Can you use it already?”

“No, not yet. Lyutillis gave us that super vague explanation of how we need an ‘unbelievably powerful will’ to use it, remember? Just knowing how to use it isn’t enough. Also, we weren’t exactly taught like, the steps needed to use it, more just the general idea behind how it all works.”

“General idea?”

Shizuku parroted Hajime’s words. This was their chance to return home. Shizuku, as well as Ryutarou, Suzu, and Kaori, all wanted to know as much as possible.

“Yeah. For example, you know how you guys all learned metamorphosis magic, right? How would you describe that magic to someone?”

Shizuku and the others were taken aback. After a few seconds, she hesitantly said, “Umm, well it’s magic that lets me create and transform monsters. It also lets me bend regular monsters to my will?”

“Yep, that’s how I understand it as well. Also, you can strengthen your monsters with it.”

Shizuku and Kaori’s explanation of the magic was more or less the same. If one wanted to get more specific, they could include the fact that metamorphosis magic’s strengthening ability had various levels.

If turning animals into monsters and monsters into familiars was the very basics of metamorphosis magic, then strengthening the stats and special magic of monsters was the first level. Granting familiars intelligence and a will of their own was the second level. The third level was magnifying that intelligence, as well as their special magic and stats to gargantuan proportions. After that, the familiar needed to start gaining experience before it could be strengthened further.

“Also, it seems monsters aren’t monsters because they have mana crystals inside them. That’s kind of a surprise.”

Like Shea had said, it wasn’t mana crystals that turned regular animals into monsters. In fact, it was the other way around. Once a creature had absorbed enough mana to turn into a monster, the mana solidified into a mana crystal.

Basically, when mana gathered together outside of a living body it turned into a Divinity Stone, but when it gathered within a living creature it became a mana crystal. However, mana crystallized easier inside a living creature, so mana crystals had a far smaller capacity than Divinity Stones. Of course, various factors like the creature’s temperament, the environment it lived in, and so on all influenced the capacity of its mana crystal once it turned into a monster.

The reason mana crystals didn’t form inside humans and demons was that the two races had crafted a formal system for using magic. They usually expended mana regularly, and if they accidentally stored too much within their bodies, there were ways to cure that so mana crystals wouldn’t form. In other words, technology and civilization kept sentient races from producing mana crystals inside them. That being said, it was possible that people who didn’t use magic for decades could still form mana crystals inside themselves.

Confirming that everyone had learned the same information regarding metamorphosis magic, Tio added, “It seems you can choose what special magic monsters you create with metamorphosis magic have as well. But that magic needs to be at least somewhat in line with the natural disposition of the creature the monster is originally based on.”

“Yeah, that white dragon Freid rides has a breath attack as its special magic... Come to think of it, how much has he strengthened

that thing?" Ryutarou asked.

"It was able to break the capital's barrier in one attack, so probably a lot. It's easily like... five or six times as powerful as the monsters around floor 80 in Orcus' labyrinth."

Hajime framed his reply using the average monster strength within the Great Orcus Labyrinth as a benchmark.

"Anyway, that's basically how metamorphosis magic works. However, you guys are subtly off. The more precise definition of metamorphosis magic is... magic that lets you manipulate organic substances."

"Umm..."

Shea looked at Hajime in confusion. Kaori and the others might have heard the word in school somewhere, but Shea had no idea what "organic" meant. For that matter, neither did Tio.

Realizing he was using unfamiliar terminology, Hajime cleared his throat and explained, "This isn't as accurate a definition, but to put it more simply, metamorphosis magic lets you mess with the stuff living things are made of. Meaning if you wanted to, you could use it on like food and paper and stuff too, not just plants and animals. Of course, you can use it on humans as well."

Put simply, one could mess with their hair or eyes or so on. As Hajime finished talking, Yue put on a visual demonstration. She cast metamorphosis magic and turned her golden-blond hair pale white. She also turned her crimson eyes sky-blue.

"Woow! Now we match, Yue-san!"

"Mmm..."

Everyone watched in awe as Yue completed her transformation. Hajime stared intently at Yue, then grabbed a camera artifact out of his Treasure Trove and snapped a picture. When she realized what he was doing, Yue casually posed for him.

Once picture time was over, Yue turned her hair and eyes back to normal, then turned to Tio. The dragonman's legs had gone numb from sitting on the floor for so long.

"I think dragomen's transformations use the same principle as well... I have no idea how it gets inherited, though."

"Oho. So metamorphosis magic is the foundation that our race's abilities are built on... I see."

Tio lapsed into thought, and Hajime continued his explanation.

"Anyway, what I meant about the general idea was that. Every ancient magic lets you manipulate some fundamental fact of nature, but until now, we didn't realize which ones they all were. And in order to use concept magic, you have to understand the fundamental aspects of every ancient magic."

"Mmm... Plus, understanding them all is so difficult that you need

to be strong enough to clear every labyrinth to withstand the burden the knowledge places on your mind.”

That was the reason the Liberators had required potential challengers to clear every labyrinth before bestowing upon them the knowledge of concept magic. Now that Hajime and Yue had acquired all seven of them, they realized their understanding of each ancient magic had been lacking. Take for example creation magic, which had been Hajime’s lifeline all this time.

It wasn’t “magic that let you enchant ore,” but rather “magic that let you manipulate inorganic matter.” In other words, the polar opposite of metamorphosis magic. Now that Hajime knew this, he realized creation magic could be applied to water or salt too.

Furthermore, gravity magic was magic that manipulated the planet’s energy. In other words, those who knew it could interfere with a planet’s magnetic field or utilize geothermal energy like magma. It could be used to cause earthquakes or volcanic eruptions as well.

Spatial magic was magic that manipulated boundaries. Meaning it could be used to create entire dimensions as well as manipulate the boundaries between fantasy and reality. A skilled master could turn reality into illusion and illusions into reality.

Restoration magic was magic that manipulated time. Which explained why in her message, Meiru had described it as magic that restores and not magic that heals. However, it could do more than just restore things to a previous state. Since it could interfere with time directly, it could be used to look into the past or potential futures based on set decision variables. Shea’s Future Sight was, in fact, just one application of restoration magic.

Spirit magic was magic that manipulated the incorporeal elements of sentient beings. In more concrete terms, it could be used to manipulate the heat, electricity, and other matterless energy that circulated within a person’s body. That also included things like memories, thoughts, and consciousness. With enough skill, a spirit magic user could take those incorporeal elements, duplicate them, and create a new soul out of them. In other words, create another person.

Evolution magic was magic that manipulated information. When it was used to strengthen someone’s stats or skills, it effectively overwrote the “information” of their abilities with something of a higher tier. But evolution magic could also be used to view the information of any person or object, as well as interfere with their total mana capacity.

All the ancient magics had been given the names they had because those names best represented how that magic interfaced with people.

Incidentally, the Compass of Eternal Paths used spirit magic to

read the users wishes, then used spatial magic to pinpoint the location of what they desired, and finally used evolution magic to process all of that information and display it accurately. None of those three things were possible with the more well-known applications of ancient magic. Hajime explained all of that to the others, and Shizuku frowned a little.

“I see. So every ancient magic can interfere with some fundamental abstract concept. I guess that’s too much for normal humans to handle. No wonder you can’t just make something to take us home... From the sound of it, it’ll be pretty difficult to combine all the right elements together...”

“That’s definitely part of it. But the biggest thing is that concept magic requires an unbelievably powerful will.”

Hajime smiled ruefully. Starting from that very vague concept, he and Yue would need to clarify their objective, condense it into a series of steps that could be executed, then provide the requisite energy to achieve what it was they wanted while also strengthening themselves enough to bear the strain of casting such magic.

“Mmm... We also need to use your creation magic to attach the spell to an object.”

“Yeah. We’ve gotta synchronize your precise mana control with my transmutation abilities and create an artifact that’s capable of moving people across worlds.”

“But it’s possible, right?”

At Shea’s question, Hajime smiled fearlessly.

“Of course it’s possible. I worked my ass off down in the abyss, practicing until I could make anything.”

There was a fire in Hajime’s eyes. From the very start, the thought of going home had been what had given him the strength to keep pushing onward within the abyss. He wasn’t going to be deterred here. When they saw his expression, Kaori and the others were certain that no matter how difficult the task was, Hajime would pull it off. At the same time, a sudden longing for home welled up within them.

Hajime thought back to his days in Japan and his days in Tortus. He felt his chest constrict, and he exchanged glances with Yue. The two nodded to each other and got to their feet.

“Are you planning on attempting it right away?”

“Yeah, explaining it helped clear some things up for me. The final goal’s right in front of my eyes, so there’s no way I can just sit still. I’ve gotta give it a shot.”

Hajime made a fist and brought it down on his open palm. In an attempt to calm him down, Yue placed her hand over his. Her gentle touch helped Hajime rein in his emotions. He relaxed a little, and some of the tension drained from his muscles.

Hajime then smiled at Yue, but before they could start flirting again, Suzu asked awkwardly, “Umm, Nagumo-kun. Will it take a lot of time to make something that can take us home? Because if so, I think I might go try and meet Eri first...”

“Nah, it won’t take long.”

Even factoring in the time it would take to practice the new applications of all the ancient magic they’d learned, as well as the fact that this was their first trial, Hajime estimated it would take him and Yue only a few hours to prepare a suitable object to enchant, then focus their concentration and cast the spell.

“Once we’re ready, the spell should be cast in an instant. I bet I can do it in one shot. No one wants to go home as badly as me. The only thing I’m not sure of is how exhausting it’ll be.”

It’d be pointless if Hajime created a way back only to be summoned again. Which was why he’d also need concept magic that could prevent that. But depending on how exhausting casting concept magic would be, it was possible he wouldn’t be able to add that protection in right away. Meaning he had to give everything a try first before saying anything for certain. Suzu considered her options for a few minutes, then nodded.

“Okay. Gotcha. In that case, I’ll rest here until you’re done casting magic. I finally earned the right to use metamorphosis magic, so I should probably practice it too. We can go to the demon capital afterward. Umm, what’re you going to do, Shizushizu?”

Suzu turned to Shizuku, wondering what her plans were. Suzu was glad that Shizuku had finally decided to be honest with her own feelings, and wouldn’t mind if she also left the party to stick with Hajime. Suzu also turned to Ryutarou. Her business was personal, and she wasn’t going to force anyone to join her in infiltrating enemy territory if they didn’t want to.

“Of course I’ll come with you, Suzu.”

“Same here.”

Shizuku and Ryutarou replied immediately. There wasn’t the slightest bit of hesitation in their voice. Smiling, Suzu thanked Ryutarou. But when she turned to Shizuku, her expression turned timid.

“Shizushizu, are you sure? You finally...”

“What’re you saying? My feelings for Nagumo-kun are important, but so are you. I can’t just leave you in the hands of these two idiots. Besides, you’re not planning on staying for long, are you? Once you’re done talking, we can rush back to Nagumo-kun, so it’s not like I’ll be lonely or anything. Plus, I want to say my piece to Eri as well.”

Shizuku casually shrugged her shoulders after saying that. And in response, Suzu smiled in relief.

“That’s my Shizushizu! So manly she’s always making girls fall for her!”

Annoyed at being called manly, Shizuku gave Suzu a noogie so powerful that Suzu teared up. Trying to change the subject she asked, “A-Also, about Kouki-kun...”

Hajime cocked his head. He then looked around the room.

“Oh yeah, where’d that guy go?”

“Did you only now realize he’s not here? I put him down in one of the other rooms. He probably won’t wake up for a while still.”

Shizuku gave Hajime an exasperated look. She couldn’t believe he’d forgotten about the hero until now. Naturally, Hajime ignored her.

“Oh well, who cares about him. Yue and I are gonna start working in the room where the magic circle is. If Amanogawa wakes up before we’re done, make sure he doesn’t get in our way.”

“There’s no way he’d try to bother you if you’re in the middle of making a way back home, right?”

Conflicted, Ryutarou tried to stand up for his friends. Hajime just shrugged his shoulders and didn’t bother arguing back.

“I sure hope not. I’ll be too focused on casting, so it’s a just-in-case thing.”

“Leave it to me, Hajime-san. Since I can’t help you make the magic, I’ll at least make sure no one bothers you!”

“Thanks. We’re counting on you, Shea.”

“If you’re watching our backs, we don’t have to worry...”

Shea puffed out her chest proudly. Hajime and Yue smiled at her, their trust in her absolute. Then, they went off to the room where the magic circle was. Shea stayed outside the door to keep watch while Hajime and Yue filed inside.

Two hours later.

“I wonder...” Suzu’s worried voice echoed through the living room. She trailed off, her vague worries as indistinct as her statement.

Kaori, who was sitting next to her, asked, “What exactly are you wondering, Suzu-chan?”

“Umm... everything, I guess? I wonder if Nagumo-kun’s doing okay? I wonder if we can really go back to Japan? I wonder if Kouki-kun’s okay? You know. I wonder if we’ll be able to make it out of the demon capital alive...”

Despite looking like she was just lying down and resting, it seemed Suzu had a lot on her mind.

“Everything’ll be fine, Suzu-chan. No matter how hard things get, Hajime-kun always pulls through. And he has Yue with him too, so there’s nothing he can’t do.”

“Kaorin...”

“As for Kouki-kun, he’s the only one who can do anything to improve his situation. Of course, I’ll help as much as I can, but it’s on him in the end. And Eri-chan... Well, act first think later! No matter how much you think about it, you won’t know how your meeting’ll go until it happens.”

Kaori’s attempts at reassuring Suzu were so haphazard that Suzu couldn’t help but laugh.

“K-Kaorin... Hahaha. You’re too cool. I guess Nagumo-kun’s rubbed off on you.”

“You’re wrong, Suzu. Kaori’s always been like this. Once she makes up her mind to do something, she’ll just keep charging forward until it’s done.”

“Hey, that’s rude, Shizuku-chan, Suzu-chan. You make it sound like I’m just like Ryutarou.”

“Hey, Kaori. What’s so bad about being like me, huh? You picking a fight?”

Ignoring Ryutarou’s protests, Kaori pursed her lips and pouted. But a second later, she got over it and turned to Suzu while clenching her fist.

“Anyway, even if I don’t know how things’ll go with Eri-chan, I’ll at least make sure she doesn’t hurt you. I’ll be with you the whole time, and if she tries to kill you, I’ll disintegrate everything and buy us time to run.”

Suzu and Ryutarou raised their eyebrows at Kaori’s declaration of “I’ll disintegrate everything.”

Blinking in surprise, Suzu asked, “U-Umm, you’re coming with us, Kaorin?”

“Of course I am. I’m not going to leave you by yourself, Suzu-chan.”

“But Nagumo-kun...”

“Like Shizuku-chan said, it’s not like we’ll be apart for long. Besides, it’s not like I can help him add enchantments that’ll make it impossible for us to get summoned again, or get Myu-chan and Remiasan for him, so I may as well protect you instead, Suzu-chan.”

“Oh, Kaorin... You’re such a good girl... I wuv you.”

“Suzu, why are you talking like that?”

Suzu’d been so overwhelmed by Kaori’s kindness that she started acting silly to hide her embarrassment.

Smiling as she watched the group of friends play around, Tio said, “If Kaori is with you, I have no need to worry. Hrrmmm, I suppose I should return to my own village at least once before following Master to his world. I must complete my mission, after all.”

“Oh yeah, you were investigating Tortus on behalf of your clan,

weren't you, Tio-san? I totally forgot about that until Hajime-san mentioned it a while back."

Tio's face fell in disappointment. She couldn't believe Shea had forgotten such an important fact.

"Shea. You wish to meet with Cam-dono before you leave as well, correct?"

"Yep. But now there's a teleportation artifact connecting to the Haulia village, so I can go see them whenever I want. Oh yeah, your village is on an island way past the northern mountains, right Tio-san?"

Shea rifled through her memories. While Hajime understood the girls all wanted to speak to their families before leaving, if their journeys took too long, he'd probably get tired of waiting.

"Indeed. It is quite a long distance, however... I'm sure Master will allow me to go after he punishes me for making him wait! Especially since I shall be able to return home via a portal."

"Your family's probably going to wonder why you look so happy despite being all wounded... I sure hope they don't panic."

Tio started drooling as she thought about how she was going to be punished by Hajime, and Shea and the others all backed away. They were used to her masochistic delusions, but that didn't mean they wanted to see them. Shea didn't want to imagine what the other dragonmen would think when they saw what Tio had turned into. The princess everyone had revered was now just a pervert.

"It's going to be a tragedy..."

"Some people might even die from shock..."

"Hey, Kaorin. I'll be fine, so could you go with Tio-san instead? You might need to bring the other dragonmen back to life."

"Nagumo better take responsibility for what he did. Hell, he should go apologize personally."

"Are you not all being a bit too unkind!?"

While everyone was joking around, the door suddenly opened and Kouki walked in.

"So this is where you all were..."

"Oh, you're finally awake. How do you feel?"

Shizuku had hesitated for a moment, unsure what to say, but then she smiled at Kouki and asked after his health. But she remained wary, just in case. Kouki smiled back, but it was obvious there was a shadow behind his smile.

"I'm fine. Sorry for worrying you guys."

"It's fine. As long as you're not hurt."

"Yeah, we're just glad to see you safe, man."

"Thank goodness."

Shizuku, Ryutarou, and Suzu all smiled at Kouki. He briefly

returned the smile, but then started scanning the room. His expression was unusually stiff.

Kaori easily guessed who he was looking for and said, "If you're looking for Hajime-kun, he's holed up in another room."

"I see... I figured I should apologize for attacking him, but..."

At the very least, it seemed Kouki wouldn't snap at Hajime like he had last time. His mental state was more stable than expected. However, he was clearly pretty depressed.

"You don't have to worry about apologizing to Hajime-san. As long as you don't start attacking him again, he probably won't care."

"Shea-san... I guess you're right." Kouki spoke hesitantly, as if he were swallowing quite a bitter pill by saying that.

In truth, while Hajime had found Kouki's rampage a nuisance, he neither hated Kouki nor did he particularly care enough to want an apology. For him, he'd just done what he'd done to protect Kaori and Shizuku's hearts from trauma. Labeling Kouki as an enemy would mean destroying what he'd already worked so hard to protect, so he'd decided to just not care about him. But the fact that he didn't even want an apology proved once again that Hajime didn't even consider him a rival.

"It looks like you've come back to your senses. Or do you still think Nagumo-kun's brainwashed all of us?"

Shizuku's glare was stern. While she was glad Kouki was awake and not in a murderous rage, she also knew that the only reason Hajime hadn't killed him was for her sake. Meaning it was her responsibility to make sure Kouki never went on another rampage.

Kouki awkwardly averted his gaze, unable to meet Shizuku's cold eyes. However, Shizuku was done coddling him.

"Look at me, Kouki."

"Ngh... Yeah, I don't believe that anymore. I wasn't thinking straight back that."

Though Kouki's expression was still clouded over, he met Shizuku's gaze and spoke firmly. Shizuku looked back at him, trying to determine if he meant it or not. Shea and the others did the same. While it was hard to tell if Kouki truly believed that in the depths of his heart, it seemed he at least believed he believed it. That was enough for Shizuku though, and she nodded.

"I see. Good. Kouki... is there anything you want to ask us?"

Trying to dispel the gloomy atmosphere, Shizuku smiled and spoke cheerfully. Sensing her intentions, Kouki smiled ruefully at her. He asked her what had happened after he lost consciousness.

Shizuku explained that everyone but him had cleared the trial and that Hajime and Yue were currently working to master concept magic enough to create a way home in the other room. Kouki sat down on a

nearly sofa and listened to everything silently. His expression didn't change at all throughout Shizuku's explanation. However, he was the only one who'd failed to clear the labyrinth. There was no doubt that he found that a harsh truth to accept.

Shizuku could also easily tell that he was hesitating about whether or not to ask the one thing he was actually dying to know. It was the reason he'd gone berserk in the first place, and why he'd convinced himself Shizuku had been brainwashed. Shizuku waited for him to ask, but sensing that he probably wouldn't be able to bring himself to do it, she decided to volunteer the information herself.

"Kouki. I'm in love with Nagumo-kun. And I want to be together with him."

"Ah..."

At that, Kouki's expression warped. Being told that flat-out by his childhood friend made it hard for him to try and interpret the truth in a more convenient manner, but it was also a difficult truth to accept. Kouki thought back to how peacefully Shizuku had been sleeping on Hajime's back, and he suddenly felt an overwhelming desire to tear his heart out.

Keeping his emotions in check, Kouki asked as calmly as he could, "Does that mean... you're going to travel with Nagumo too? Even though he already has a favorite, and Kaori? Don't you think you should reconsider? I'm saying this for your sake, Shizuku, you—"

Shizuku shook her head and cut him off.

"Kouki, I'm not asking for your advice here. I'm simply letting you know because you're my childhood friend."

"....."

Kouki looked as though he'd just swallowed a thousand stinkbugs. He glanced over at Ryutarou and Suzu for salvation, as well as Kaori. *Surely you don't want your best friend fighting you for the guy you like, right?* his gaze seemed to say. But none of them backed him up. They had already accepted Shizuku's decision. No one would sympathize with Kouki at this point.

The color drained out of Kouki's face. Realizing he could no longer run from reality, impatience, jealousy, hatred, and anger welled up within him. But he had no valid target for his rage, and he knew he couldn't just start throwing a tantrum. After all, the last time he'd done that, he'd ended up unconscious.

The bitter knowledge that he'd been handily defeated was one of the main reasons he wasn't about to go on another rampage. However, everyone could tell that Kouki was once again slipping down a dark path. Though Ryutarou knew this was a trial Kouki needed to overcome himself, he couldn't help but want to help his best friend out. He gave Kouki a sympathetic look, but Kouki interpreted that as

pity, making him even angrier.

Knowing he couldn't just wildly swing his sword at people, Kouki instead said sardonically, "Hahaha, so you're all his friends now, huh? Even though he's a murderer who'll abandon anyone he doesn't like..."

"Kouki!" Shizuku yelled. Shea and Tio narrowed their eyes dangerously. Meanwhile, Kaori watched the whole scene play out with a worried look. But Kouki didn't notice any of their reactions. Even if he had, he was like a spoiled child who didn't know when enough was enough.

"Maybe I should have been the one to fall off that bridge inst—"

Kouki had gone too far. Kaori, the girl who'd been most hurt by Hajime's presumed death, slapped Kouki to shut him up.

Bringing a hand up to his cheek, Kouki looked blankly at Kaori. Her hand still raised, she said in a sobbing voice, "Kouki-kun, you're one of my precious friends... So please... don't make me hate you."

"Kaori..."

Kouki was at a loss for words. That slap had knocked them all out of him. Kaori's expression burned itself into his retina. Still, determined to say something, Kouki opened his mouth. But before he could speak, a blast of wind tore through the room. It was followed by a wave of mana so dense and thick it looked like a wall. Though no one had fired a mana shockwave, it felt just like one to everyone.

"This feels like... Hajime-san! Yue-san!"

Indeed, the wall of mana was a mixture of crimson and gold. Shea dashed out of the room. Nothing like this had ever happened before when Hajime had made an artifact. More pulses of mana intermittently emanated from the room Hajime and Yue were in. Whatever was going on in there, it wasn't normal. Kaori and the others came to their senses a split-second later and ran after Shea.

The closer the group got to the room with the magic circle, the more powerful the waves of mana became. It was like they were trying to fight their way to the center of a typhoon. If they weren't careful, the torrent of mana would knock them unconscious.

Still, the group eventually managed to make it to the room. The door was open, and Shea stepped in first.

Covering their faces, Kaori and the others followed suit. Inside, they found a spiral of golden and crimson mana rising to the ceiling. Hajime and Yue knelt at the center of the spiral, facing each other. Their eyes were closed and their hands clasped together. Neither of them moved an inch. A bluish-white light emanated from their palms... and there was a glowing crystal in their hands. It was made of Divinity Stone combined with various other ores.

"Sh-Shea! What on earth is..."

“I don’t know. But it looks like the two of them are fine, at least.”

Shea’s bunny ears twitched. She smiled in relief as she picked up the regular sound of their heartbeats. Despite the storm of mana swirling around them, the two were perfectly calm.

Kaori and the others stared at Hajime and Yue as well. The two were quiet, making no noise. They were completely focused on the task at hand. Neither of them had even noticed Shea and the others had come in, and sweat beaded on their foreheads. They were clearly pouring everything they had into casting concept magic.

“If they’re fine, we should leave,” Shizuku said quietly. Tio nodded in agreement.

“Indeed. It would be a shame if they failed due to our interruption... Master would likely punish us all.”

“Please don’t look so happy about that, Tio-san.”

Quietly, the group backed out of the room. As they left, Kouki stared intently at Hajime. There was no emotion in his eyes. But that was because he was doing his best not to let his rage and frustration show.

“Kouki.”

Shizuku called out to him. But Kouki said nothing. In fact, he made to take a step forward.

“Kouki!”

“Ah!”

Shizuku grabbed his arm and glared at him. Her grip was like iron. Terrified by the look in her eyes, he retracted his outstretched foot and slowly took a few steps back. But a second later—

“What’s going on!?”

“I-Is that a movie?”

“It’s showing a... dark cavern?”

A projection of an unfamiliar location appeared in front of Shea and the others. The projection was reflected on a thin film of dense mist, and the projection itself was made out of mana. Shea and the others gazed at the strange scene, forgetting that they were supposed to be leaving.

Suzu muttered, “It looks kind of like the Orcus labyrinth...”

“Certainly, the only caverns I know of that are illuminated by green glowstone are the ones in the Great Orcus Labyrinth.”

Tio nodded in agreement. It was true that only the Great Orcus Labyrinth had that much green glowstone.

However, the reason Suzu seemed uncertain was that the cavern seemed far more natural than the man-made tunnels that made up the upper floors of the Great Orcus Labyrinth. These looked as though they hadn’t been shaped by human hands at all. Furthermore, the cavern was much wider and more spacious than any of the floors Suzu

and the others knew of. But as the video played out, everyone quickly realized what was going on.

Deep within the dark cavern was a four-way intersection. Within that intersection stood a rabbit with white fur. Its legs were oddly enlarged, bulging dark veins running down their length. Another pulse of mana blew through the party, this one carrying emotions with it.

“Is this... unease? Or impatience?”

“I sense fear as well... I think this video’s a memory.”

“I suspect it is Master’s memory. A memory of his time in the place he describes as the abyss.”

The girls’ deductions proved correct. As the video continued to play, more emotions poured into the mana pulsing out of Hajime. He watched the unknown monster with fear and unease. No one had any idea how or why videos of Hajime’s past were playing, but everyone was certain this was indeed Hajime’s past, and the feelings being transmitted through his mana were his feelings. He had said almost nothing about the time he’d spent in the abyss before meeting Yue. Those events were behind him now, and Hajime wasn’t the kind of guy to brag about how much suffering he’d been through or how hard his life was or anything.

Shea and the other girls all glanced at each other. This was an opportunity to learn more about Hajime’s past, and they didn’t want to miss out. Their feelings united, they nodded to each other and decided to remain. They turned back to the projection, watching with rapt attention. None of them were about to miss what might be their only chance to learn what had turned Hajime into the person he was now. Ryutarou, Suzu, and Kouki watched as well. They, too, were curious about Hajime’s transformation.

As the strange rabbit leaped toward Hajime, someone let out a gasp.

“Hajime-san!”

“Hajime-kun!”

Shea and Kaori reflexively shouted out warnings. The projection blurred slightly, and the fear in Hajime’s mana grew tremendously. Everyone watched as the rabbit toyed with him. It crushed his left arm, and anguish started mingling with the fear in his emotions. Shea and Tio grit their teeth in sympathy, and Kaori’s face twisted in pain.

“Oh no... Hajime-san, how could you be beaten so easily by...”

“This is the Nagumo-kun we knew. He was so weak he could barely fight.”

For a moment, the video cut out. Hajime was so afraid of the rabbit that he’d closed his eyes. As everyone was drowned in his fear, he opened his eyes again. In front of him, the rabbit that had been torturing him earlier was cowering in fear. Following the rabbit’s

gaze, Hajime found a white-furred bear staring down at him.

Even at a glance, he knew it was on a completely different level than the rabbit. The bear cut the rabbit in half with a single swipe and ate it. Through the video, Shea and the others caught a glimpse of its eyes.

At their current skill level, a mere Claw Bear was hardly a threat. But the way it looked at Hajime, as if he was just *food*, went a long way to explaining why Hajime was so terrified of the creature. The girls watched in horror as the bear cornered Hajime, cut off his left arm, and ate it right in front of him. Their love for him made the scene that much more painful.

From the emotions coming off of Hajime's mana, they could tell he wanted to escape from reality, but the pain of losing his arm and the blood spurting from the stump forced him to accept what was happening. Though they couldn't hear Hajime's screams, since the projection was visual-only, the rich emotions coming from his mana helped those watching recreate them in their mind.

Being treated as nothing more than food, Hajime's fear reached a tipping point. No longer caring about how pathetic he looked, he fled as fast as he could, fear driving him forward. Unable to run, he transmuted a passage in the wall and scrambled deeper and deeper into the darkness. There were so many emotions running through his mind that they were hard to identify.

The video continued, showing Hajime sobbing as he kept crawling. Before long, those sobs died away, the embers of his life slowly fading away.

"Hajime-san..."

Tears spilled from Shea's eyes and she bit her lip. Kaori, Shizuku, and Suzu covered their mouths with their hands, trembling. They looked as though they could feel Hajime's pain. On the other hand, Tio had closed her eyes and was doing her best to keep her emotions under control.

The video went dark as Hajime blacked out, then returned a few seconds later. Confused that he was still alive, Hajime started to transmute himself further down the path he was creating.

Finally, he came face to face with the wondrous crystal whose liquid had saved his life. The Divinity Stone, which back then had been so full of mana it was leaking Ambrosia. Hajime licked up the healing liquid and squatted in a corner, his heart shattered.

For days he waited for salvation that never came. His memories of that time were clearly hazy, as the video cut out relatively often. However, the emotions he was feeling were still transmitted clearly through his mana. Shea and the others felt firsthand just how lonely he'd felt, waiting futilely for help.

The darkness he lived in was so absolute that at times he nearly forgot who and what he was. Starvation had gnawed at him every waking moment of his life. And to top it off, the phantom pain of his lost arm left him in agony. Day after day, Hajime lived through agonizing torture.

Eventually, he lay down and wished for death, but the miracle liquid keeping him alive prevented even that.

From there, he went from intermittently wishing for death, and desperately wanting to live. Like a broken radio, he kept swapping between those two modes. Over and over, he questioned himself wondering how things had come to this. With no outlet for his emotions, he eventually turned to hating his classmates and cursing the unfairness of the world.

Finally, his heart broke. But it didn't end there. By discarding unnecessary emotions and retaining only the drive to survive, Hajime recreated himself into the kind of person who could kill anyone that got in his way without hesitation. The extreme pressure he'd been placed under had reforged his will into an unbreakable blade.

Once he'd decided he was getting out of here alive, Hajime began to act. He glanced down at the small depression filled with Ambrosia. He crawled over to it and lapped it up like a dog. As always, it only healed his physical injuries, doing nothing for his hunger or pain. The face reflected in that small glowing puddle was the face of a different person. He wasn't the same Hajime he'd been before falling down here. Eyes glimmering with hatred, Hajime left the small shelter he'd made for himself. The only weapon at his disposal was his transmutation ability, an ability so weak it could hardly be called a weapon. Even so, he armed himself with it and set out to hunt monsters.

From there, he killed his first monster, and—

“Ngh, that looks so...”

“He mentioned he'd had to eat monsters but... this is horrible...”

Kouki and Ryutarou watched on, aghast, as Hajime ate monster meat for the first time. His hands and clothes and face were stained with blood. He truly looked like nothing more than a feral monster. After a few seconds though, he dropped his food and screamed.

The pain he was in boggled belief. Hajime banged his head against the ground over and over, and the video cut out multiple times as the meat destroyed his body while the Ambrosia put it back together. It was a horrific sight.

As the scene played out, Hajime's mana transmitted just how painful that first transformation had been. If hell existed, that was the kind of suffering that awaited people in it. Had Tio not used spirit magic to stabilize Ryutarou, Suzu, Shizuku, and Kouki's mental states,

they would have fainted just from the feelings transmitted through Hajime's mana. As it was, everyone was still pale-faced. Unable to bear watching any longer, Ryutarou averted his gaze... while Suzu did her best not to throw up.

Finally, the transformation ended, and Hajime's figure was reflected in the pools of blood and spilled Ambrosia around him. He looked the same as he did now. His obsession with survival and his hatred for the world had been strengthened along with his body. It was at this point that he truly became the monster of the abyss.

Using the abilities granted to his commonplace Synergist job, which was perhaps the most generic job in Tortus, he crafted weapons he'd learned about in a different world. It took him weeks of constant practice and thousands upon thousands of attempts, but finally, he succeeded in creating a gun. He then challenged the Claw Bear, which was the same monster that had once crushed his spirit, to prove to himself that he could fight his way through anything that stood against him.

After a fierce battle, he conquered the Claw Bear. It was then that he realized what his true desire was. Namely, to return home. As if responding to that desire, the mana in the room pulsed. It then contracted, surrounding only Hajime and Yue.

I want to return home... It was a pure, simple wish. Shea and the others were so touched by the depth of that desire that they could feel their chests constricting.

Hajime's crimson mana glowed with a dazzling light, while Yue's golden mana supported it from the side. The dazzling pillar of mana slowly dimmed, then started swirling around Hajime and Yue. It looked to Shea and the others as if a galaxy was revolving around the two of them.

I want to return home to Japan... Hajime's wish was a quiet, subdued one. But at the same time, it was a wish that would never waver, and the depth of his attachment to it was overwhelming. The Hajime in the video looked up at the dark ceiling and quietly closed his eyes, reaffirming his resolve. When he opened them again, an unbelievably powerful will was reflected within them.

Hajime strode forward, heading toward the bottom of the abyss. He no longer balked at the idea of advancing into the endless darkness. From there, the video faded away and the mana creating it was sucked into the whirlpool swirling around Hajime and Yue.

Shea, Kaori, Tio, and Shizuku were all sobbing. They had no words for the emotions they were currently feeling. But they were all smiling as they cried. They were proud of the man who'd managed to overcome despair and crawl his way out of hell through sheer willpower.

Even Ryutarou and Suzu were overwhelmed. At the same time, they realized this was why they'd always felt like they couldn't match up to him. While being in Kouki's party meant they'd had their fair share of rough battles, they'd always had Meld and his experienced knights backing them up. Furthermore, they'd always had reassuring comrades by their side, each of them overpowered in their own right. If you asked Suzu or Ryutarou whether or not they'd be able to overcome that harsh abyss, they would both confidently have said no. Especially since they knew what little they'd seen was only the beginning. There was no way they could have withstood what lay ahead.

Kouki, on the other hand, limply looked around, his eyes empty. He thought back to how he'd said it would have been better if he'd been the one to fall into the abyss instead.

Until moments ago, he'd truly believed that it was unfair that Hajime was so strong despite seemingly not trying at all. Even though Shizuku had told Kouki when Hajime had first returned that Hajime had likely gone through his fair share of hardship, Kouki hadn't really believed it. He'd thought that Hajime had gained strength just by being dropped into the abyss, and was now doing whatever he pleased. But now that Kouki had seen it all through Hajime's eyes, he realized he'd been mistaken.

You wanna go home, huh? Kouki thought to himself. He asked himself if he'd ever truly wanted to return that badly. And at the same time, he realized how flimsy his own conviction had been. He'd claimed he'd be a true hero and save everyone who needed saving, but he'd never truly been resolved to do that.

N-No, that's not right. I'm not the one who's wrong here. Sure, I get where Nagumo's coming from now... but still... he took everything from me... Kouki desperately tried to convince himself that he wasn't in the wrong. But as he was going through his mental dilemma, Hajime and Yue's spell progressed.

Their hands opened up like a budding flower and crimson mana started pouring into the Divinity Stone and other ore that they were holding. The metals began fusing together and started molding into something new. All of the surrounding mana started getting sucked into those tiny ores. They were being transmuted. Wiping her tears with the hem of her sleeve, Kaori watched on curiously.

"Is that... a key?"

As she'd said, the ores were forming the shape of a key. A translucent, dodecahedron-shaped crimson crystal formed at the base of the key, where it'd be held from. Motes of golden mana glimmered within the crystal like tiny stars. The key itself looked like some kind of old antique key with all sorts of artistic flairs added on.



Hajime and Yue, who'd had their eyes closed this whole time, finally opened them. It looked as though they were staring at nothing, but at the same time also staring at each other. As the mystical scene played out, someone gulped.

The two of them opened their mouths simultaneously and said, "Open the door to our desired land!"

Their voices echoed through the room like the tolling of a bell. The two of them lit up, glowing brighter than the sun. The swirling galaxy of mana around them erupted like a supernova and the room was inundated in red and golden light, blotting out everything. The mana carried with it an unshakable, indestructible will. The force of the mana knocked Shea and the others out for a second, but they regained consciousness before falling to the floor.

By the time they were lucid again, the light had disappeared. Staggering, Shea and the others regained their balance and watched as that tremendous amount of mana poured into the key's crystal. At long last, Hajime had created what he wanted. A key leading back home.

More specifically, a concept magic teleportation artifact known as the Crystal Key.

"Hajime-san! Yue-san! Are you okay!?"

Shea hurried over to her two companions. Hajime and Yue sat next to the Crystal Key, slumped against each other. They were still holding hands. Kaori and the others ran over to Hajime as well, a second after Shea.

"Kaori-san, how are they?"

Shea turned to Kaori, a worried look on her face. After a brief pause, Kaori relaxed and said, "They're fine. They just used up so much mana they lost consciousness."

Everyone breathed a sigh of relief upon hearing Kaori's diagnosis. Kaori quickly cast a spell to transfer some of her mana to Hajime and Yue. After a few seconds, the two of them groaned and opened their eyes.

"Huh? How'd it go?"

"Mmm... Where's the artifact?"

Kaori gave them a quick summary of the situation and handed them the Crystal Key.

"You two collapsed after using up all your mana. I've given you some of mine, so you should be fine now. I'm not sure if you succeeded or not, but this is the artifact..."

"I see. Thanks, Kaori. It's been a long time since I've fainted from mana overuse. I wasn't sure how much we'd need, so I just used everything I had, but... you'll be able to adjust how much we use next

time, right?"

"Mmm... Yeah. I think I've got the hang of it now. The question is if we'll be able to exhibit a will that's strong enough to be turned into a concept next time."

Hajime turned to the key in his hands and examined it with his Demon Eye. It was saturated with more mana than anything he'd ever made before, and through his Demon Eye it looked like a tiny bundle of light.

"We did a pretty good job... I can feel the energy inside of it. It feels just like the Compass of Eternal Paths."

Hajime smiled in satisfaction. Even Yue couldn't read the emotions in his eyes as he looked down at the Crystal Key.

Hajime was so deeply moved that his hands were shaking. His entire journey up until now had all been for the sake of obtaining this key. The Crystal Key had the name it did because it was a crystallization of Hajime's strongest feelings.

Yue smiled gently and put her hand over Hajime's.

"Thank you, Yue."

"Mmm..."

Hajime wasn't just thanking her for helping him make this key. He was thanking her for keeping him human back when he first met her in the abyss, for always being by his side, for loving him, and of course for creating the embodiment of his will with him. He was thanking her for everything.

Looking up, he saw that Shea and the others were also looking gently at him. Feeling a little embarrassed, Hajime cleared his throat loudly and said, "Let's test it out."

He pulled the Compass of Eternal Paths out of his pocket. Unlike his Gate Keys, which could be used to open portals to the respective keyholes they connected to, the Crystal Key did exactly what its concept magic had designed it for. It opened a door leading to the user's desired destination. But in order to do that, the user needed to have an accurate mental image of their destination, as well as a good grasp of the physical or metaphysical distance to it. But that meant so long as Hajime had the compass as well, he could have the key take him anywhere.

Hajime set a destination in mind and filled the Crystal Key with mana. The key glowed deep crimson, while the golden particles within the crystal set into its base began to dance.

A spiral of mana rose up from Hajime. Nervously, he thrust the key into the air in front of him. It melted seamlessly into the air as if there was some invisible door there. Its crimson and golden glow grew brighter.

Like they'd expected of an object enchanted with concept magic,

it drained an enormous amount of mana to activate. Hajime could feel his mana leaving him at an alarming rate. Furrowing his brows, he glared at the shimmering air in front of him and took a deep breath. Then, he turned the key. It flashed, and a second later the space around it swirled, transforming into a circular portal.

Hajime had succeeded. Smiling happily, he turned to inform his comrades of his success.

“Aaaaaahn!”

But before he could say anything, he heard a girl moan in ecstasy from beyond the portal. It was followed by the distinctive sound of flesh slapping against flesh. Feeling as though they were peeking into the depths of the abyss, Hajime and the others peered inside the fully opened portal. What they saw scarred them.

“You like that, don’t you, you shameless little bitch!?”

“Aaah! Cam-sama! You really are Shea’s father! You’re amaaaaazing!”

Cam was whipping Altina, who was lying on a bed beneath him.

“Bwah.”

Shea staggered backward, looking as though her soul had left her body. Kaori hurriedly patted her on the back, bringing Shea back to the land of the living. While the others hadn’t taken quite as huge a shock as Shea, they were nevertheless aghast.

Sensing there was someone there, Cam turned around. When he saw Hajime and the others on the other side of the portal, his eyes widened.

“B-Boss!? H-How did you manage to open a gate here!?”

“Huh? Shea! And everyone else, too!”

Cam looked utterly bewildered, while Altina quickly recovered from her confusion and smiled happily at the party.

Somehow managing to recover from his shock Hajime said, “Yo, Cam. Sorry for interrupting you. I didn’t realize you were in the middle of something.”

“Mmm... I didn’t know you two had that kind of relationship. Shea, don’t die on me now,” Yue added.

“Fufu, Comrade Altina. I am glad to see you have found a worthy master.”

Ignoring Tio entirely, Cam turned to Hajime and Yue and stammered, “Th-Th-Th-This is a misunderstanding!”

However, he wasn’t fooling anyone. Shea, who’d returned to her senses, trembled with rage. A pillar of pale blue mana rose from her body. She silently took a step forward and retrieved Drucken from her Treasure Trove. Glaring coldly at Cam and Altina, she transformed her warhammer into bombardment mode. Her hand rested on the trigger, ready to unload an exploding slug into her father.

“H-Hold on, Shea! This isn’t what it looks like! Your dad would never—”

“Shea! Cam-dono is a wonderful man! I should have expected as much from your father! I just wanted to sneak a peek at some of your stuff, but when he caught me, he punished me sooo hard!”

Altina smiled innocently, crushing any chance Cam might have had to talk his way out of this. He glared at Altina and growled, “Shut up, you!” But that only caused her to shiver in pleasure. It appeared Altina was beyond saving now.

According to Cam, the truth was that Altina had gotten so obsessed with Shea that she’d tried to sneak into Shea’s old room and look through some of her stuff. Cam had caught her and had been in the process of chastising her.

“You say that, but you looked like you were enjoying whipping her...”

“Boss!?”

Not only was Hajime not convinced, but Cam’s daughter also wasn’t either.

“Die, you shitty perverted dad!”

Shea mercilessly pulled the trigger on her father. An explosive slug hit him square in the torso. Hajime closed his eyes in sympathy, then closed the gate. Just before it shrunk to nothing, everyone was able to hear Cam and Altina’s screams. No one seemed inclined to help them, though.

“Shea, cheer up...”

“Don’t worry, Shea. That was just... a moment of weakness. I’m sure your dad will come to his senses now.”

“Hic... Yue-san, Kaori-san, thank you. But I know that wasn’t enough to kill Dad. Before we go to Hajime-san’s world, I need to make sure to finish him off for good... by mincing him into little pieces.”

Shea couldn’t believe she’d seen her dad engaging in something borderline sexual with a girl her age. She had been well and truly scarred.

The unfortunate incident they’d witnessed notwithstanding, Hajime had at least confirmed the Crystal Key worked. Relieved, and feeling a little sorry for Shea, Hajime ruffled her bunny ears.

“Uhh, look Shea. I’ll discipline him properly, so please don’t cry.”

“Waaaaaaaaaaaaah, Hajime-saaaaaaaaaan!”

Shea leaped into Hajime’s arms. Her ears flopped back and forth as she tried to deny the reality she’d just seen. Every time they did, they hit Hajime in the eye. But he endured, for Shea’s sake.

Behind him, Suzu muttered, “I feel like their relationship isn’t any different from Nagumo-kun and Tio-san’s...”

For Shea's sake, Hajime ignored that too.

Everyone silently returned to the living room. No one wanted to talk about what they'd just seen, and the atmosphere was awkward. But soon enough, Shea stopped crying and everyone put the sight out of their mind.

Hajime and the others lounged on the living room sofas and rested for a bit. Once they were recovered, Hajime looked at everyone with a smile.

"Alright, the first test had some unforeseen hiccups, but..."

He held up the Crystal Key. Choking up with emotion, he said, "It works. We have a way home, guys."

Suzu jumped to her feet, grinning. Ryutarou also got up and pumped his fist in the air, whooping with joy. Shizuku and Kaori hugged each other, broad smiles on their faces. Even Kouki, who'd been depressed this whole time, couldn't help but smile a little.

Hajime smiled, a profound sense of accomplishment washing over him. Seeing such a genuine smile on his face, Yue, Shea, and Tio smiled as well. Everyone was in a festive mood. For a good thirty minutes, everyone cheered and laughed and joked with each other.

Once people started settling down again Hajime said, "That's great and all but... it looks like it's going to take some time before I can work out concept magic that'll protect us from being resummoned."

Just creating the Crystal Key had left Hajime and Yue more exhausted than ever. It seemed the process of turning a concept into reality left the casters in a state of such weariness that not even spirit or restoration magic could cure it.

It made sense, considering casting concept magic required a level of knowledge and stamina that could only be attained by clearing all seven labyrinths. The only way for Hajime and Yue to recover was regular old rest.

Furthermore, Hajime now knew just how "unbelievably powerful" of an unbelievably powerful will he needed to cast concept magic. His desire for something had to be as great as his desire to return home. But of course, it was obvious his desire to return home was much greater than his desire not to be resummoned. In order to cover for his lack of will, he needed to have a much more concrete understanding of what it was he was trying to achieve.

Was he trying to block magic from any other world from affecting him? Was he trying to repel only Ehit's power? Or was he trying to nullify summoning magic itself? Moreover, he needed to make sure whatever concept magic he created, it didn't prevent him from returning of his own free will. Otherwise, Myu, Remia, Shea, and Tio wouldn't be able to see their friends and families again. And that was something he wouldn't allow.

“So yeah, I’m going to need to do a lot more trial and error. I guess I can try stuff out while we’re going to grab Myu and see Tio’s family... but I’m not 100% sure I’ll be able to do it.”

Hajime scratched his head apologetically, but honestly, Kaori and the others could care less about not being 100% sure they wouldn’t be called back.

“Even then, this means we can actually go home... This is... amazing... Hic... Hajime-kun... Thank you...”

Overcome with emotion, Kaori grabbed Hajime’s hand and started crying. Her thank you was as packed with feeling as Hajime’s earlier thank you to Yue had been. She was especially grateful after having seen his memories. She was thankful he was still alive, thankful he hadn’t given up back in the abyss, thankful that he’d come to save her when she needed him most, thankful that he cared for her, and thankful that he’d found them a way home.

Hajime used his free hand to scratch his cheek. Then, after a moment’s hesitation, he hugged her. Kaori’s eyes widened, but then a second later, she smiled and hugged him back, burying her face in his chest. Seeing that, Yue just shrugged her shoulders and gently patted Kaori’s shoulder.

“I’ll forgive it just this once,” she said.

Shizuku watched Kaori enviously for a moment, but then glanced back at Kouki, shook her head to herself, and smiled at Hajime and Kaori. In all honesty, she wanted to hug Hajime too, but she didn’t want to risk destabilizing Kouki any further right now.

Of course, now that she’d decided to live for herself more, she wasn’t going to be satisfied just watching. Later, when Kouki wasn’t around, she’d get Hajime to hug her. She had no idea if she’d be able to work up the courage to actually ask, but she’d at least hold his hand. Despite the fact that she’d already kissed him on the cheek, Shizuku was easily embarrassed still.

Hajime was able to read Shizuku’s thoughts just by looking at her expression, but he pretended not to and instead talked about their future plans.

“I want to spend some time trying to make a summon blocking artifact, so we’ll take Fernir to go get Myu.”

Using the airship to travel instead of the Crystal Key would help preserve Hajime’s mana, which he would need if he was attempting more concept magic. He’d also need to conserve his mana to get back home. Opening a gateway to earth would take far more mana than Hajime possessed. At least 4-5 times as much as his maximum mana pool. And while he did have his Gate Keys, which used comparatively little mana, he could only use them to open portals to locations he’d set up Gate Holes in beforehand. Since he’d only developed the Gate

Key after returning to the capital, he hadn't been able to set a hall in Erisen yet.

"In that case, we'll go to the demon capital in the meantime. Now that we finally have this cool ancient magic, I want to tame some monsters to take with me, but..."

Suzu wasn't sure how useful taming monsters from within the Frost Caverns would be. While labyrinth monsters were far stronger than the variety you found outside, the ones in these caverns were all ice-based. Here, where the sub-zero temperatures nullified most fire magic, that wasn't much of a problem. But most other places weren't this cold. Not only would the monsters here easily be shot down by fire magic up on the surface, but they also wouldn't even be able to regenerate like they could using the ice down here.

Hajime considered Suzu's plight for a bit, then casually threw one of his Gate Keys at her. Fumbling, Suzu barely managed to catch it. She gave Hajime a confused look.

"Yue and I are gonna rest here for a bit to get our mana back. That Gate Key connects to Verbergen, so why don't you guys go there to tame some monsters from the forest while we're resting here? Most of the monsters there are good at manipulating their presence. If you tame and strengthen them, they'll definitely come in handy."

"I see... Yeah, that sounds like a great idea. Thanks, Nagumokun!"

Suzu smiled at Hajime, and he waved at her to go on.

In the end, Suzu, Ryutarou, Shizuku, Kouki, and Kaori all decided to go to Verbergen, while Hajime and Yue recovered as much as they could from the exhaustion of using concept magic. Kaori was tagging along because she was worried about leaving Suzu and the others alone, while Kouki was ostensibly going to help his friends. In truth, he just couldn't bear to stay in the same place as Hajime.

Once they left, the living room felt a lot emptier. Of those who remained, Tio decided that rather than trying to tame monsters, she would be better off using her newly acquired metamorphosis magic to strengthen her dragon transformation. Shea, on the other hand, was much like Hajime in that her aptitude for metamorphosis magic was woefully low. She could have gone with the others anyway, but right now, she really didn't want to meet with her Dad or Altina. If she saw them now, she wasn't sure she'd be able to stop herself from crushing them flat.

Hajime and Yue lounged for a while longer, regaining their strength. Hajime's expression was more peaceful and relaxed than it had ever been. He looked as though he was sunbathing on a pleasant spring day. Having finally found a way home, Hajime was returning more and more to his old, kind self. It made sense, considering his

long, arduous journey was finally behind him.

As Hajime and the others rested, they discussed in greater detail everything that had happened during their respective battles against their copies. After Tio finished her tale, she once again begged Hajime to punish her for daring to use him as a tool to get her revenge. And though everyone knew he was growing kinder, Shea and Yue were utterly shocked when Hajime started lightly patting her on the back instead of flicking her away like usual.

In fact, even Tio was surprised. So surprised that the strength drained from her limbs and she started fidgeting in embarrassment. It was only after Shea shouted, "Did you stop being a pervert for once!?" that she returned to her senses.

"H-Hrrmm. You're too kind, Master... but while I enjoy being tormented, this feels surprisingly pleasant in its own way. Though it's quite embarrassing as well."

"Tio-san, if only you were like this all the time. You'd be the most charming and capable woman around..."

"Mmm... Hajime definitely needs to take responsibility for ruining her."

Blushing, Tio straightened her back and sat formally in front of Hajime. Shea and Yue smiled wryly as they watched.

Hajime smiled too and said, "Well, I guess I wouldn't want Tio calling some other guy Master, so I'll have to take responsibility..."

"H-Huh? Master, are you saying that you finally see me as a worthy lover... just like Shea?"

Tio's eyes glimmered with hope.

Hajime responded with a straight face, "I mean, would you like it if your pet dog started wagging its tail for some other guy?"

"Mmmmmm!? Is this my punishment!? To think you would impart such harsh words onto me after being so kind, Master! You truly are amazing!"

Tio hugged Hajime and started panting in excitement. But for once, Hajime didn't push her away.

They're both beyond saving... Yue and Shea thought simultaneously.

Half a day passed while Hajime and Yue rested and Tio trained. Finally, a portal opened in the center of the living room. Suzu and the others had returned. They'd brought with them a menagerie of tigers, wolves, snakes and other high-level monsters from Verbergen. It seemed their taming attempts had been successful. The party rested for half a day longer, and Suzu and the rest took that time to strengthen their new familiars.

Hajime also fashioned collar artifacts enchanted with his Gate Keyholes for everyone's familiars. This way, Suzu and the others could let them roam free in their homeland and still summon them

whenever they needed them.

“Alright, we should probably get going now,” Hajime said.

Suzu and the others nodded. Their preparations were complete.

“Oh yeah. Here you go, Hajime-san.”

As they left the palace, Shea handed Hajime a teardrop-shaped pendant. It was made of a transparent blue crystal that looked like ice, and it was engraved with Vandre Schnee’s crest. This was proof that Hajime and the others had conquered the Frost Caverns. In truth, when Hajime and Yue had fallen unconscious, part of the wall had slid away to reveal an alcove with the pendant. Shea had retrieved it back then, but she’d forgotten to give it to Hajime until now.

Hajime took the pendant and stepped into the magic circle that was at the entrance of the palace. There was a sharp crack, and the fountain in front of the palace froze. An egg-shaped chunk of ice then rose up from the frozen fountain. A second later, the egg burst, sending shards of ice flying everywhere. From within the egg appeared a dragon made of ice. The translucent ice was made of shimmered white light.

Hajime and the others were in awe as they watched the spectacle. The ice dragon descended to where the party was and lowered its neck so they could climb on. It seemed this ice dragon was the shortcut that would take them out of the Frost Caverns.

“This is one hell of a way to make a shortcut.”

“Mmm... Maybe it’s our reward?”

“Never thought the guy who made such a nasty trial would give us something like this.”

Hajime and the others clambered onto the dragon’s back, using its scaled neck like a staircase. Once they were situated, the dragon flapped its wings and shot into the sky.

It looked like the dragon was going to crash into the ceiling, but a moment before it did, a circular hole appeared to let it through. It flew through the opening without slowing down.

As the party enjoyed the breeze, Tio muttered, “The only dragon worthy of bearing Master upon its back is me... Is it too late to swap?”

Hajime and the others laughed, and a few seconds later they were through the tunnel. The dragon emerged inside the snowbound land of the Schee Snow Fields. Hajime expected the dragon to drop them off here, but it continued flying upward. It shot up through the dark clouds covering the snow fields and came to a halt only when the party was basking in the warm light of the sun. From there, it banked and started flying horizontally.

“Judging by the position of the sun, it’s taking us northwest. I guess it’ll take us all the way out of the snow fields.”

“Mmm... Miledi and Meiru should have learned from Vandre.”

“I feel like all the female Liberators had nasty personalities.”

West of the snow fields was the Demon Kingdom of Garland, while the Reisen Gorge was to the north. Since the dragon was going northwest, it'd drop them off somewhere close to both locations, so regardless of the race of the challengers, they'd be near some part of their own home territory. Judging by the fact that the party didn't feel cold despite the altitude, the dragon had also erected a simple weatherproofing barrier. Vandre's shortcut was a far cry from Miledi's toilet or Meiru's seawater torpedo. And while Haltina hadn't unceremoniously evicted challengers from her labyrinth, she'd incorporated cockroaches into her trial.

Meanwhile, Vandre had not only provided a comfortable and convenient shortcut, it looked cool too. Hajime couldn't help but feel grateful toward Vandre. At the same time, he couldn't help but pity the male members of the Liberators. They'd no doubt had a rough time dealing with their female counterparts.

“You know, I've never seen Nagumo-kun make an expression like that...”

“I don't know what happened in Miledi-san's labyrinth, but I distinctly remember how horrible the end of Melusine's ruins were.”

As Suzu and Kaori chatted, the dragon began to descend. It seemed it was nearing its destination. From the looks of it, the ice dragon was incapable of going past the boundaries of the snow fields. It plunged back into the clouds that perpetually covered the snow fields and brought them down to the very edge of the snow.

“Thanks. I'm sure the guy who made you was a great man.”

“Unlike Miledi, Vandre Schnee knows how to treat his guests!”

“Mmm... Thank you. I'm glad Vandre was a much better person than Miledi or Meiru.”

Hajime, Shea, and Yue thanked the dragon as they got off it. Hajime wasn't sure if it was just his imagination, but the dragon seemed pleased by the praise. It waved its tail happily, then flew back into the icy blizzard.

Hajime and the others weren't happy they were stuck in the snow field's blizzard again, but at least they knew the exit wasn't far. The party hurried toward the border of the snow fields, but then Hajime and Shea suddenly stopped.

They narrowed their eyes and said, “Everyone, be careful. It looks like we've got a welcome party waiting outside.”

“I definitely recognize this presence. There's a lot of them too. This isn't good.”

Everyone tensed up upon hearing Hajime and Shea's warnings. They drew their weapons and prepared for battle. Hajime and the others exchanged glances, nodded to each other, then walked out of

the snowstorm. Outside, they saw—

“So you came out here after all. It’s the same place I was deposited. So, did you all manage to clear the labyrinth, white-haired boy?”

“Fufu. Long time no see, Kouki-kun. Have you been well?”

The demon general Freid Bagwa, and his white dragon Uranos. He’d brought with him a few hundred flying monsters, most of them dragons. Eri was there as well, her gray hair fluttering in the breeze. She was flying, a pair of gray wings sprouting from her back. But scariest of all were the apostles. There were five hundred of them. An army large enough to blot out the sky awaited Hajime.

Extra Chapter: The Seven Most Important Things for an Otherworld Summoning

“Hajime... Come down!”

I hear my mother’s voice calling me from downstairs. Looking at the clock, I realize it’s 6:15 PM. Time for dinner. But right now, I’m fighting the demon lord’s army, so I don’t have time for dinner.

“Well, if you’re in the middle of a fight, I suppose dinner can wait.”

As always, mom manages to figure out what I’m doing without me saying a thing. My mom, Sumire Nagumo, is a popular shoujo manga artist, and a bonafide otaku as well, which is why she understands these things better than most moms. I open my mouth to shout back that I’ll eat once I’m done preparing against the demon lord’s attacks, but—

“Just know that if you don’t eat dinner now, I’ll make your beef bowl without this super high-grade beef we got as a gift.”

“A beef bowl without beef is just rice!”

Mom got high-grade beef as a gift? This isn’t the time to be fighting the demon lord! I hurriedly drop my controller and get to my feet. Mom never makes empty threats.

“Hajime! Leave the dinner arrangements to me and focus on your battle!”

I can’t believe my dad, Shuu Hajime, wants my meat so badly that he’s trying to convince me not to come down for dinner. My back hurts, but I nevertheless hurtle down the stairs. Time is of the essence! I burst into the living room and dad clicks his tongue.

“Tch...”

He reluctantly puts the beef he took out of my bowl back where it belongs.

“Dad, you realize normal dads don’t try to steal their kid’s food, right?”

I take my seat and glare at my dad.

“Well, I’m no normal dad. The Nagumo family doesn’t believe in lax parenting!”

“Stealing my beef has nothing to do with whether or not your parenting is lax!”

“I’m just teaching you that it’s survival of the fittest out there.”

I look over at Dad’s beef bowl. It’s time to hunt. If survival of the fittest is the law of the land, then he can’t complain if I make his beef mine.

“Alright, that’s enough, you two. Stop fooling around and eat. Fufufu, there’s nothing tastier than free meat.”

Mom brings the miso soup over, and dinner begins. The moment the three of us take our first bite, we fall silent. The beef’s so soft that it melts in your mouth. Like starving savages, we tear into our beef bowls.

Once dinner’s over, we all sigh in contentment. High-grade beef really is something else. While we’re basking in the afterglow, the evening news starts playing on TV. The beautiful newscaster’s voice fills my ears. Apparently, some high school boy who went missing a while back was found safe and sound. He hadn’t been kidnapped, just went hiking in the mountains without proper gear and got stranded.

I guess he just couldn’t control his urges... I take a sip of my tea.

“I see. So he was summoned to another world.”

Dad sips his tea as well. Nice one, Dad. You managed to come up with an even nerdier explanation than me.

Dad’s an even bigger otaku than me, and he’s the president of a video game company, so I guess it makes sense that he’s always thinking about stuff like this.

“But since he managed to make it back, he’ll be able to use all the superpowers he gained while in that fantasy world to live an easy life.”

“Can we please stop pretending he was actually isekaied? There’s no way that happened.”

His family was probably worried about him. If all he said after being found was, “Oh, I just went to another world for a bit!” his life’s already too fucked up to be easy. Dad sighs and shakes his head.

“Don’t be so sure, Hajime. Nothing in this world is certain.”

“He’s right, you know. The two of us often hoped we might have wild fantasy adventures when we were young.”

The isekai boom only started a few years ago. Meaning Mom and Dad were way ahead of the curve when they were young. I don’t know if I like this.

“Oh yeah! Let me show you something cool, Hajime!”

Dad dashes up the stairs. A bunch of strange noises start coming out of his room on the second floor. After thirty seconds of banging and crashing, he comes back down.

“Here. I bequeath this to you, Hajime.”

“What is this?”

Dad hands me an old notebook. It’s bound in leather and looks

needlessly fancy.

“Oh my, now that’s nostalgic!” Mom says, her eyes sparkling.

Before I can open it Dad grins and says, “This is part three of my what-if series! It’s the isekai edition!”

“The heck does that mean!?”

Apparently, Mom and Dad had written down tips and guides in case various fantastical situations ever occurred to them. They’d called them the what-if series. The situations varied from a zombie apocalypse to an alien invasion, to what to do if your left arm started throbbing all of a sudden. Apparently, this notebook was about what to do if you were isekaied.

The really scary thing here was that Dad had put this twenty-year-old notebook somewhere he could access it within thirty seconds.

Even though I told my parents I didn’t need something this ridiculous, they kept insisting. Eventually, they managed to enter “The seven most important things” I’d need to know in case I was summoned to another world into my cell phone. They even locked the file so I couldn’t delete it. That just pissed me off, so I decided I’d never read them no matter what.

Then, around the time I was beginning to forget they were even on my phone—

Mom, Dad. I’m sorry, I was wrong. I never thought I’d be sitting in a palace in another world... I actually was summoned to another world, along with the rest of my class. Tomorrow, we’re going to delve into our first dungeon.

Unfortunately, I’m the most worthless member of our class. Not only are my stats really low, but my job is also a generic blacksmith one that plenty of people in this world have. All I can do is process and shape ore. No one in my class likes me either. Hiyama’s bullying is getting worse by the day, and now he’s got magic and souped-up stats to make my life hell. It’s like giving a toddler a gun.

But worse than that is the church that worships the god that brought us here, Ehit. I’m gonna be honest, the pope and his followers scare the shit out of me. The pope’s always smiling and acting polite and giving us everything we want, but he’s definitely scary.

I’m scared of the king and the other nobles too. They all seem to love the pope. This whole time, I’ve been haunted by that image of Ehit smiling that I saw in the cathedral we were summoned into.

Also, it’s the church that wants us to fight in their war. I’m scared of fighting, both against monsters and other people. On top of that, I’m pissed at Hiyama. So this whole isekai thing honestly isn’t all that great. I mean, there are a few really cool things, but I’m more worried than I am awed.

Granted, it’s not like I have my back against the wall or anything.

And I'm still doing my best to do everything I can. But I'd really like it if there was at least one thing in my life right now that wasn't out to get me. I'm just tired. I guess maybe that's why I'm suddenly remembering that dinner when you gave me the seven most important things I needed to remember for an otherworld summoning.

I go back to my room and open up my closet. My uniform's hanging up there. I reach into my pocket and pull out my cell, which is useless in this world. Since I turned it off right after we were summoned, I've still got a good amount of battery left.

I relax as the light of civilization hits my face. Then, I navigate through my folders until I find the file I'm looking for. I smile as I read the ridiculous title.

There's a total of seven pages here. Each page contains a single tip, it looks like. I scroll down to read the first tip.

"If you get summoned alongside other people and someone in your group looks useless, make sure to befriend them! They've definitely got some hidden strength you just can't see!"

"Dad, Mom, sorry, but I'm the useless one."

Also, I definitely don't have any hidden powers. *This isn't any help at all... Let's see what the next tip says.*

"Be careful! The princesses of the country you're summoned to are often evil bitches! If you're going to trust someone, trust the princess of another country!"

"I can't believe how biased you guys are..."

Unlike the fanatical king and his nobles, Liliana's a surprisingly nice princess. She's already become good friends with Shirasaki-san and the others. And she's even really nice to me. Probably because I'm useless... If even her kind smiles are actually hiding an evil interior, then I don't think there's anyone I can trust.

What's next...

"Hurry up and seal your left arm!"

"Dad, Mom, my left arm isn't throbbing and it doesn't have an evil god in it."

"If you hear a mysterious voice, make sure to listen to it! It's probably a spirit or something! It'll definitely be a helpful ally!"

I'm not hearing any voices! Next!

"Register at the adventurer's guild!"

"Now you're just writing down the stuff you want to do!"

God, my parents are so useless. Oh well, maybe the next one'll be useful!

"Befriend the assassin in your party! They're probably the strongest of the group!"

"The assassin, huh...? I guess we do have one."

This is the first decent piece of advice they've given. I pocket my

phone and go look for our class' assassin. I end up looking for half a day.

"I can't find Endou-kun!"

Why!? Why is it that no matter who I ask, no one has any idea where he is!? When I checked the dining hall and the training grounds, I found traces that he was there, so why can't I actually find him!?

"Dad, Mom. You were right. Endou-kun's the strongest one among us."

He's always been hard to spot, and even teachers occasionally forget to call his name during roll call, but he's never been *this* hard to find. I'm pretty sure he's not avoiding me... Also, I feel like I've been hearing someone whisper my name the whole time I've been searching. I think I'm just getting tired. I'll look for Endou-kun later. He's harder to find than Waldo.

I go back to my room, my shoulders drooping. Then, I flop onto my bed and take out my phone. I'm expecting the last piece of advice Mom and Dad have for me to be just as useless as the rest.

"If things look dicey, run! Your life takes priority! I know you normally take it easy, but you always act recklessly when things get dangerous, so make sure you take care of yourself! It doesn't matter what kind of dirty things you have to do to survive, just come back alive! We'll forgive anything you have to do, as long as you come back to us!"

My vision blurs, and my hand starts to shake. But I can't start crying yet. There's still one sentence left.

"Don't give up! Make sure you come back to us no matter what!"

"What the hell... None of these are actually useful tips. How seriously do you guys take your delusions... Sheesh!"

I stare at the screen silently for a while. Drops of water drop onto the LCD screen, making it hard to read. But I don't look away.

Time slows to a crawl. I have no idea how long I spend staring at my phone, but by the time I come back to my senses, my battery's nearly dead. The sun's set, too, and my room's dark. The light from my phone is the only light in the room.

Normally, I find the mechanical light of an LCD screen to be cold, but right now it feels surprisingly warm and gentle. But then the battery dies and the light vanishes.

My cell phone won't be turning on again. At least not until I get home. I wipe my tears with my sleeve and get to my feet. I open the closet and put my phone back into my uniform pocket.

I feel like I have something supporting me now. My heart no longer feels trapped in a haze of unease. The warm light of my LCD display has settled inside me, guiding me forward.

It was thanks to that light that I was able to ask Shirasaki-san to protect me the night before we entered the labyrinth, as embarrassing as it was. It was thanks to that light that I was able to tell her I'd be fine. To be honest, I thought she looked beautiful when she smiled at me in the moonlight.

If nothing else, I'm grateful to Mom and Dad for giving me the courage to reassure her. But at the same time, I'm sorry, Mom, Dad. I didn't listen to what you told me. When I should have ran, I chose to stay and fight. In the end, I couldn't prioritize my own life. I knew it was dumb to try and fight that giant Behemoth. When I was falling into the abyss, all I could think about was how sorry I was for failing you guys.

From there, I changed. Thinking back on it, it was probably those words from my parents that helped me endure all those hardships down in the abyss. If it wasn't for them, I wouldn't have been able to stand back up to challenge the Claw Bear.

"Don't give up! Make sure you come back to us no matter what!"

Even when my heart and soul had been crushed, I still held on to those words. Which was why I—

"Hajime?"

I slowly opened my eyes and found Yue staring down at me.

"Sorry, I fell asleep."

"Mmm... It was only for five minutes."

Shaking the sleep out of my brain, I looked around. I was in the living room of the ice palace at the end of the Frost Caverns. Taniguchi and the others had just come back and everyone was resting.

I guess I fell asleep while everyone was talking...

"You made a lot of faces in your sleep... Are you okay?"

Yue clambered onto my knees and I looked into her eyes. She stared sleepily at me, her crimson eyes glowing faintly. I brushed her blonde hair back and stroked her cheek.

When I first met her, I thought she was as radiant as the moon, illuminating the darkness of the abyss. That was why I gave her the name Yue. A few other names, like Tsukuyo, Luna, and Selena had popped into my mind as well, but Yue was the one that seemed to fit best.

Just recently I'd learned what her original name was. Aletia. I couldn't imagine what she must have felt when she threw that name away and asked me for a new one. But at the very least—

"Yue."

"Mmm?"

The happy look she gave me whenever I called her by her new name reassured me that I'd made the right choice. I was confident I'd gifted her a new name that was much better than her old one. Names held power. They could be used as a curse to restrict people... or in my case, to bind two people together.

When Aletia became Yue, she was reborn. Despite carrying the deep trauma of betrayal, Yue had nevertheless trusted me. And when she'd smiled at me for the first time, she'd bound me to her. I stopped being a mindless monster and turned into the vampire princess Yue's partner. It was thanks to her that I could be both the monster of the abyss and also human.

In truth, choosing to answer Yue's pleas to save her was one of the biggest turning points in my life. Meeting Shea was another. But back then, it was Yue who'd convinced me to let Shea tag along.

Likewise, my meeting with Tio was the same. It was because of Yue's words that I began to question my personal creed of killing everyone who opposed me and decided to spare Tio. All three of them followed me without complaint when I wanted to go save Myu and Kaori, too.

Like my fake had said, I might be using Yue as an emotional crutch. At the very least, she was the one person I knew I'd never be able to hold a candle to.

Smiling to myself I muttered, "Thank you."

"Mmm? Mmm... Mmm..."

Yue cocked her head for a second, then smiled at me. That smile made it clear she'd understood everything I was trying to say.

"You should enroll in school once we get back to Japan, Yue. I want to see you in a school uniform."

"Mmm... You got it."

I'm looking forward to it. I wonder what Mom and Dad will say when I introduce Yue to them? They might be even happier about the fact that I brought Yue back than the fact that I came home. Nah, not might. They'll definitely be happier about that. Those two otaku love cliched crap like vampire princesses and stuff.

"I'll do my best to impress your parents..."

"Sounds good."

"I need to ask them how many grandkids they want, too..."

"S-Sounds good..."

"And I need to apologize..."

"Huh? Apologize for what?"

"Mother, Father, please forgive me! I stole your son's virginity before asking you whether or not you accept me as his bride!"

"Yue-san, please don't say that. I'm begging you."

Crap. I'm gonna have to teach Yue about how Japanese customs are

different from here before we go back. Especially since Mom and Dad would actually play along if she started saying stuff like that.

The last thing I wanted was to bring chaos to my house. I opened my mouth to explain to Yue how talking to my parents was going to work, but before I could say anything, she was lifted off my lap.

“Sheesh! I take my eyes off you for a second and you’re all over him again!”

Kaori was the one who’d lifted Yue up, and she threw the tiny vampire girl onto a separate sofa.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Yue said coldly as she launched herself at Kaori. Kaori responded in kind, and Shea was forced to jump in and mediate between the two of them again.

Tio and Yaegashi were so used to the sight that they barely even spared the three of them a glance. As I watched them, I thought back to my journey up till now.

The first thing that flashed through my mind was my first meeting with Shea. At first, I’d only helped the sobbing useless bunny girl because I’d wanted her to guide me through the sea of trees. But then that same girl who’d been terrified of fighting managed to beat up Miledi’s Golem. Honestly, I was impressed.

And then afterward, she jumped in without hesitation to save Sensei, even though she didn’t know anything about her. All because Sensei was someone I cared about. Then, when she fought against her sworn enemy, the Hoelscher Empire, she was so dazzlingly bright that even I was captivated by her.

If anything, she’s better at seduction than I am. She managed to capture Yue’s heart and mine... There was no doubt that it was this clairvoyant bunny girl with more pluck than any protagonist I’d ever read about that had brought color and joy to our lives.

“Shea.”

“Yeah? What is it? I’m kinda busy—”

“Thank you.”

Despite how much we rejected her in the beginning, she stubbornly stuck with us. She even managed to make me fall for her. Shea stopped trying to pin Kaori’s arms behind her back and looked blankly at me. Her surprise was so cute that I smiled.

“C-Come on! Surprise attacks like that aren’t fair!”

She started fidgeting, her tail swishing back and forth. Then, she covered her face with her bunny ears, embarrassed. It looked like she’d been able to figure out how deep my gratitude for her ran as well. Her embarrassed reaction really was cute though.

Unfortunately, I’d need to find some way to hide her ears when we went back to earth. Regardless of whether people thought they were real or fake, her ears combined with her looks would attract too

much attention from other guys. Actually, considering Cam was converting all the rabbitmen in the forest into merciless assassins, Shea might actually be the last super cute bunny girl left.

I guess that's my fault, huh?

"Shea... Uh, I'm sorry."

"I think I can guess what you're apologizing for, but in that case, shouldn't you sound a bit more sincere?"

Shea slid her ears off her eyes and glared at me. I looked away, feeling too guilty to meet her gaze. That aside, I'd need to tell Mom and Dad all about Shea as well.

I should tell them about Altina too. Those two looove elves... If I recalled correctly, Dad was insisting that his dev team put elves into the most recent game he was working on. In fact, one of his employees had come to me to convince Dad to stop, since the game they were developing wasn't set in a fantasy world.

Hmmm...

"Hey, Shea."

"Yue-san, Kaori-san! I'm having a moment with Hajime-san here, so could you stop pulling on my— Oh, what is it, Hajime-san?"

"I'm thinking of kidnapping Altina and gifting her to my dad. What do you think?"

"I think you've lost your mind!"

Hey, that's rude. Don't look at me like I've actually gone insane. Oh no, now she's asking Kaori to cast restoration magic on me. Aaand Kaori's doing it.

"Let me explain. Dad's a huge fan of elves. Especially seductive elves. Though, I guess Altina's more of a masochist than a seductress. Still, I'm sure he'll like her. If we put her in a cage and kept her as a pet, she'd probably be harmless, right?"

"Kaori-san! We need more restoration magic, now!"

Can you please stop casting that on me! The light's blinding...

"Think about it. Dad'll be happy. And Altina'll be overjoyed to be your pet, Shea. It's a win-win situation."

"No, it's a lose-lose situation!"

Shea smacked me on the head. *I don't get it. What's the problem?*

"Master, why settle for her? I would gladly be your—"

"I want to introduce you as one of my comrades, so rejected. I can't treat you the same way I treat Altina."

"O-Oh, I see..."

Tio fidgeted in embarrassment. Blushing, she muttered, "You've been acting so kind to me recently, Master. I'm not sure how to react..."

I guess telling Tio the truth is more effective at keeping her in check than treating her like dirt... I thought back to my first meeting with Tio.

It all started with me trying to drive a stake into her ass. As a result, she turned into a huge pervert.

Wow, that's really all there was to that meeting. There weren't any emotional scenes or anything...

"Wh-What is it, Master? Please don't stare so intently at me."

If she knew all I was thinking was that we really don't have any emotional memories together and that me trying to stick a stake into her ass is the most vivid memory I have of us, she'd probably be mad, huh? Actually, she'd probably get turned on...

I was worried that Tio's clansmen would get mad at me when we went back to see her family. I hoped they wouldn't blame me for turning their princess into a pervert. *Oh yeah... I totally forgot Tio was royalty until just now.*

"Hey, Tio."

"Wh-What is it?"

"Do you want me to fight god for you?"

When I asked that, the room fell quiet. Yue and Kaori stopped fighting, and Shea and Yaegashi looked from Tio to me and back again. The blush vanished from Tio's face and she gazed solemnly at me. Her draconic eyes, brimming with intelligence and endowed with the power to see the truth pierced through me.

After a brief pause, she smiled and said, "I appreciate that you care so much for me... Truly, I do."

Tio brought a hand to her chest and closed her eyes. She looked so stunning that everyone's breath caught in their throats.

"It's true that my clan has dreamed of the day someone would appear to strike down god for us."

"Yeah. The whole reason you left your village was because you wanted to see if that time had finally come, right?"

"Indeed. At present, you are the only one capable of fighting god, Master."

"Thought so."

"However..."

Tio spoke firmly, with conviction.

"Forcing people to fight when they do not wish to would go against the dragonman creed."

"....."

"Master, I am glad that you are willing to ask me what my wishes are, despite your desire to return home being so strong that you were able to craft concept magic around it. But answer me truthfully. Do you wish to kill god for the sake of this world?"

"Nope, not really."

I answered immediately. I had no interest in fighting for the sake of thousands of people I didn't even know, or a world I didn't care

about. For better or worse, I'd always prioritize the people close to me.

However, if, after I returned home, there came a time where Tio had to return to Tortus and fight to protect her family...

"Then there would be no meaning in asking you to fight," Tio said gently, with a smile.

"You have already made other promises you need to keep, have you not?"

"Yeah."

I promised Yue I'd show her my hometown. I promised Myu that as well. Shea and the others all wanted to go to Japan as well. I'd promised everyone I'd take them there, and I intended to keep that promise.

"In that case, you must fulfill those first."

Man, Tio's way more mature than I am...

I glanced over at Amanogawa. He twitched, then looked away, pretending he didn't notice me staring at him. He'd been going on about how he'd save everyone from god for a while now. I had no idea what was going to happen in the future, but I knew a guy like him would never give up. There was also the possibility that someone else with as much potential as Amanogawa showed up in Tortus and cleared all the labyrinths as well.

However... I thought back to our time in the Grand Gruen Volcano. When I'd been gravely injured by Fried or whoever, Tio had transformed without hesitation, even though it meant her existence would become known to the world. So if the time ever came that Tio had to go back and fight...

"Tio."

"Yes?"

"We're going home... to Japan."

"I see."

"I want to show you my hometown too. I want to introduce my parents to the dragonman who helped me so much in this world."

"I-I see."

"I want to go back to living a peaceful, normal life. But if the time ever comes that you need to go back to Tortus to fight..."

"Yes?"

Everyone gulped, looking worriedly from Tio to me. However, I had eyes only for Tio, and she likewise was looking only at me.

After a brief silence, I said resolutely, "Then I'll make a new promise with you."

"A new promise?"

"Yeah. As for what kind of promise... Well, we can decide that when the time comes."

“Indeed, we can... Thank you, Master.”

Tio covered her face with her sleeves, while Yue and the others grinned at her. They crowded around her, trying to get a peek at her expression. Right now, Tio was nothing like the calm, Super Tio she became when things got serious, or the usual perverted dragon she normally was.

Hey, Sensei. I made the right choice, didn't I?

When I'd first met Tio, Sensei had lectured me. She told me that if I abandoned anything and everything that wasn't important to me, that I'd end up living a lonely life. That my choices wouldn't bring happiness to me, or the people I cared about.

In the end, my priorities still hadn't changed. I wasn't capable of fighting for justice or equality or abstract ideals like that. But at the very least, I was willing to fight for the things that were important to the people I cared about. After all, it was only thanks to Tio and the others that I'd made it this far.

I watched with a smile as Yue, Shea, and Kaori tried to peel Tio's hands away from her face. Then, I looked over to Yaegashi and the others, who were also watching the scene with a smile. Seeing how happy everyone was made me feel relaxed. My emotions must have been showing on my face, since when Yaegashi turned to me—

“Ah...”

She stiffened up. After a second of shocked silence, she suddenly blushed. Wondering what had gotten Shizuku so flustered, Kaori and the others turned to me as well. When they saw my face, they stiffened too.

“What?” I asked Yaegashi, feeling a little embarrassed.

“I-It's nothing... Just... you looked surprisingly gentle for once, so...”

Confused, I touched my face. My expression didn't feel any different. I turned questioningly to Yue, and she nodded in agreement.

What the hell? You guys are making me blush... I quickly tried to change the topic.

“Oh yeah, I've gotta do something about your body too, Kaori.”

“Huh!? Wh-What do you mean... ‘do something about my body?’”

Blushing, Kaori glanced over at a nearby wall. I was pretty sure there was a bedroom behind that wall. I opened my mouth to say something, but Yue beat me to it.

“You damn pervert... Hajime's talking about what he's going to do with that body you're in right now after you go back to your original one!”

“Oh! O-Of course that's... I-It's not what you think, Hajime-kun! I wasn't expecting anything at all! Besides, I'd like to have my first time with Shizuku-chan present, too! I'm not a pervert! Please believe me!”

Yaegashi glared at Kaori, as if to say, "Don't include me in your delusions!" Meanwhile, I spotted Amanogawa trembling off in the corner. Sakagami and Taniguchi noticed he was acting off too, then exchanged a look. They both wanted the other to go and calm him down.

This is one lively party we have here. I remember way back then, when Kaori and Yaegashi were the idols of the class. I never thought both of them would end up falling for me. Especially Kaori...

I thought back to that conversation we'd had the night before I fell into the abyss. Kaori had sworn she'd protect me. And even after I'd fallen, she was the only one who believed I was still alive. After we were reunited, she constantly felt inferior to Yue and the others. So much so that she swapped bodies after dying once. Her devotion to me was so great I couldn't help but be moved.

She was a clumsy girl, with a habit of getting so focused on her goals that she forgot to take stock of her surroundings, but she was kinder and stronger than anyone else. If I hadn't fallen into the abyss, she likely would have been the ideal I looked up to.

"U-Umm, Hajime-kun?"

It seemed I'd ended up staring unconsciously at her. Blushing in embarrassment, Kaori averted her gaze.

"Sorry. I was just thinking about our lifespans."

"O-Our lifespans?"

Kaori wasn't the only one surprised by that response. Everyone looked confused.

I smiled ruefully at her and said, "Since I've eaten all this monster meat, I have no idea what's happened to my lifespan now."

I hadn't really thought about it before, but it was pretty important. Kaori, Yaegashi, and Shea gulped, looking worried. Kaori looked especially worried, as if I'd just announced I was dying tomorrow or something.

I raised a hand to calm everyone down and added, "Considering I've been strengthened in every conceivable way, my lifespan's probably a lot longer than a normal human's too."

"O-Oh, that's what you meant."

Kaori sighed in relief. I smiled at her and said, "Regardless, I have no intention of dying and leaving Yue alone. But Kaori, once you go back to your original body, you'll have the same lifespan as a regular person, right?"

The same was true for Yaegashi and Shea as well. Both of them muttered, "Oh..." while Kaori said, "That's... true. I..."

"Don't look so worried. Miledi managed to attach her soul to a golem and live for thousands of years, so we know there are ways to stay alive for longer. Worst case scenario, we can do that to you guys."

But chances are, we can find a way to lengthen all of your lifespans if we study the body of that apostle a bit more thoroughly.”

“.....”

Kaori stared intently at me. I cocked my head, wondering if I’d said something strange. But a second later, she smiled just as gently as Tio had earlier and said, “Hajime-kun, you’re always thinking about the future, aren’t you?”

“Is that wrong?”

Kaori vehemently shook her head and her smile grew deeper. At the same time, Yue, Shea, Tio, and Yaegashi all smiled at me as well.

“It’s just, we’ve always been struggling to just make it out of the next crisis alive so... I’m happy. Especially since the future you’re thinking of includes me. Fufu, it feels like my heart’s floating!”

“I see...”

I didn’t know what else to say. When I saw Kaori and everyone else’s smiles, it felt as though any words I might have would be pointless anyway. Feeling the heat rise up my face, I awkwardly looked away again. The moment I did—

“Kaori... You should take that body of yours and float away with your heart. And then never come back.”

“Yue, how could you say that? Do you have no soul?”

I didn’t know whether it was to spare me everyone’s gazes, or just because Yue enjoyed teasing Kaori, but she started insulting her again. Naturally, Kaori’s smile went from happy to threatening, and she turned to Yue. As always, the two started scuffling.

Sighing, Shea went to break them up while Tio just watched and Yaegashi shook her head. Taniguchi joined in as well, deciding it’d be more fun to participate than to rest. As chaos descended upon the living room once more, I thought back to my parents’ words again.

“Don’t give up! Make sure you come back to us no matter what!”

The last of their seven tips had come in handier than they ever realized.

Don’t worry Mom, Dad. I’m coming home soon. Together with all the wonderful people I met in this world.



Afterword

Hello everyone, chuuni lover Ryo Shirakome here. Thank you very much for picking up volume 10 of Arifureta.

This is the first time we've had an arc spanning two volumes. What did you guys think of it?

I mentioned this last time as well, but writing about the thoughts and feelings of characters is a lot harder than anything else. Figuring out what would fit each character's personality was really hard, and I got stuck multiple times. The whole time it felt like I was taking one step forward and two steps back until finally, I managed to hit a point where I was taking three steps forward instead.

I could write battle scenes for days, but more emotional moments like these are really hard. I spent so much time glued to my PC writing all these cool action scenes, then I'd come back to my senses and realize I needed to be writing more emotional moments and get all depressed.

Anyway, enough about my woes. I ended up making the latter half of this arc pretty short in the original version, but for the print version, I decided to flesh out all the characters a bit more. I hope fans of the original find all the extra text worthwhile enough to pick up the print version.

We're nearing the end of the Arifureta's story, and we're already in the double-digit volume numbers. Honestly, the whole time I was writing this volume I was in awe over the fact that we'd hit volume 10. It's all thanks to you readers that I've made it this far. Thank you so very, very much.

On another note, Volume 10 comes bundled with a drama CD. The drama CD cover has Tio wearing casual Japanese clothes, and she looks absolutely great in them. It's like she's gone into Super Tio mode to do voice acting. Unfortunately, inside the contents of the drama CD, she's just a pervert from start to finish. For those of you who bought the drama CD version, I hope you enjoy her erotic panting!

Now then, forgive me, but I'd like to do some shilling with the few lines I have left. Volume 5 of the manga and Volume 3 of the Arifureta Zero manga spin-off released at the same time as Arifureta 10, so please buy those too! Roga-sensei, Misaki Mori-sensei, and Ataru Kamichi-sensei are all wonderful mangaka, and their art truly brings the world of Arifureta to life. The manga's a totally different

experience from the novels, so you should definitely give it a shot. Also, the anime'll be coming out soon, so make sure to watch that too!

Now then, last but not least, the acknowledgments. I'd like to thank Takaya-ki-sensei, Roga-sensei, Misaki Mori-sensei, and Ataru Kamichi-sensei for all their wonderful illustrations. I'd also like to thank my editor, my proofreaders, and all the staff at the publication division for making sure every volume is as perfect as it can be. Lastly, I'd like to thank my readers, both those from Narou and those who're reading the print releases. Thank you so, so much! I hope you continue to enjoy the Arifureta series!

Ryo Shirakome

Bonus Short Stories

The Bunny Girl's Strength Knows no Bounds

Tio gave Hajime a look of longing, begging to be punished. Hajime and the others were lounging in the living room of Vandre Schnee's palace, recuperating after their long ordeal. Tio was sitting on the floor beneath Hajime and giving him puppy dog eyes, her finger in her mouth. She had the look down perfect, and that pissed Hajime off. It seemed Tio was still hoping Hajime would punish her for revealing that she'd secretly wanted to use him to kill Ehit. But, of course, Hajime had known that from the start, so he had no intention of giving her what she wanted.

"Hajime... Hajime..."

A refreshing voice interrupted Hajime's annoyed thoughts. He turned to Yue, who was sitting next to her, and asked, "Yeah?"

"Will you... punish me?"

"....."

Alright, I've gotta calm down. Just stay cool, take Yue to that bedroom over there, and...

"Hajime-kun, you better not do it."

The moment Hajime saw Kaori's stand appear behind her, he regained his composure and nodded. The masked demon looked even more vivid than before. *Is she using evolution magic to make it real or something?*

Shifting his attention away from Kaori, Hajime turned back to Yue and cocked his head.

"Ahem. Where'd that come from, Yue?"

It seemed almost as if he'd changed the topic because he'd been scared of looking into Kaori's accusing eyes any longer.

"Mmm... Because I was thinking of entrusting you to Shea."

It appeared Yue was asking to be punished because she'd let her fear for the future get the better of her. And since Tio was asking for punishment, Yue didn't want to be left out. She gave Hajime a pleading look, similar to the one Tio had given him moments before. Then, she turned around and stuck her cute butt up in the air, as if asking Hajime to spank it, and licked her lips.

"Disintegrate!"

"Mmm!?"

A flash of silver light shot toward Yue. A second later, the sofa

disintegrated. Yue only barely managed to roll away in time to avoid the blast. Cold sweat poured down her forehead and she rounded on the culprit.

“Kaoriii!”

Kaori turned to Yue with a smile that didn’t extend to her eyes.

“Yes?” she asked innocently, causing Yue to seethe with anger. Both of their expressions were bloodcurdling enough to make children cry.

“Calm down, Yue. As for your punishment... Didn’t Shea already punish you enough?”

“Mrrr...”

Reluctantly, Yue flopped down on another, undamaged sofa. Smiling wryly, Hajime turned to Shea.

“But I’ve gotta say... I’m impressed you managed to fight Yue to a standstill, Shea.”

Yue’s wounds regenerated instantly, she could cast advanced-level magic without incantations, and above all, she could use all kinds of ancient magic. Honestly, Hajime had been amazed to hear Shea had grown strong enough to go toe-to-toe with Yue.

Half-embarrassed, half-proud, Shea blushed, her bunny ears flopped back and forth. “Hehehe, I thought I was gonna die back there.”

“Would you mind giving us more details of your fight?”

The moment Tio asked that, everyone’s ears perked up.

Yue folded her arms and recounted in a slightly trembling voice. “Even when I tried to freeze her in ice, she just punched her way through my magic...”

“Wait, seriously? You were able to stop Miledi’s golem with that magic!”

Hajime was even more surprised now. But he, and everyone else listening, soon realized that was just the tip of the iceberg.

“When I tried to stop her with gravity magic, she just ignored the pressure with fighting spirit...”

“W-Well, she does specialize in body strengthening magic... But still, that’s amazing. Your gravity magic can even push me back, Yue...” Kaori replied in awe.

“She smacked my Draconic Thunder into oblivion...”

“W-Well, if she covered her warhammer in mana, that would theoretically be possible...” Tio mumbled.

“And she stopped my spatial magic attacks with just her body...”

At this point, Hajime and the others were beginning to wonder if she was still a beastman. However, Yue wasn’t done talking about Shea’s exploits yet.

Supposedly, every single one of Shea’s attacks had broken the

sound barrier. Supposedly, all of her wounds had healed in seconds, even serious ones. Supposedly, even though she had little affinity for it, Shea had been able to use evolution magic on her body strengthening magic, making her so fast even Yue couldn't follow her movements. Supposedly, she'd managed to make use of her innate rabbitman ability to manipulate her presence while doing all of that, making her even harder to track. And even when Yue did manage to hit Shea with a spell, she apparently just withstood it without taking damage. Supposedly, her battle cries alone had been loud enough to give Yue concussions.

The list went on and on. Yue's eyes glazed over as she recalled all of the feats Shea had accomplished, and everyone turned to Shea in shock.

"Aww, you're making me blush with all that praise, Yue."

Shea really was blushing. In fact, she looked absolutely adorable, hiding her face behind her ears. But behind that cute exterior...

"Shea, can you stand over there for a second?" Hajime asked casually.

"Hm? Is this fine?"

Shea stood against the wall as requested. The moment she did, Hajime drew Donner at the speed of light and fired at her. Though he'd only fired a rubber bullet that wasn't accelerated by his Lightning Field railgun, Yue and the others were still shocked to see that he'd shot at Shea.

"Whoa."

Almost reflexively, Shea grabbed the bullet aimed at her shoulder. Yue and the others shivered. She'd actually just grabbed a bullet out of the air.

"Jeez, what was that for, Hajime-san!?"

Even when she was pouting, she looked cute. Thinking maybe the last bullet had been a fluke, Hajime fired one more just in case. There was a metallic clang as Shea blocked it with her fist, and everyone stared at her in shock.

Yue's Magic Lessons: Part 2

While everyone was lounging around Vandre Schnee's living room and recovering their strength, Suzu suddenly walked up to Yue.

"O-Onee-sama! Can you tutor me in magic!?"

Suzu clasped her hands together in front of her chest, looking almost like she was praying. Her eyes gleamed with expectation. Yue, who'd been attempting to seduce Hajime, turned around with a "Huh?" Embarrassed, she quickly straightened her back and pretended she hadn't been about to pounce on Hajime.

"You want me to teach you magic?"

"Yep. I managed to get myself a familiar, but metamorphosis magic is still hard to control..."

"Why are you asking me?"

"Because you're the best, Onee-sama!"

Suzu's looked at Yue with something akin to hero worship in her eyes. Yue blinked a few times, then puffed her chest out proudly. She was enjoying the praise.

"Mmm... Well, I wouldn't say I'm the *best*," she muttered, but she was kicking her legs back and forth happily. However, her elation was short-lived. A second later, two of her friends came to rain on her parade.

"Suzu-san, I'm saying this for your own good. You shouldn't ask Yue-san to teach you."

"I concur. Suzu, you would be better off learning from me than Yue."

"Shea!? Tio!?"

Shea and Tio each laid a hand on one of Suzu's shoulders. Yue gave them a hurt look, while Suzu just turned around blankly.

"U-Umm, Sheashea? Tio-san? Why're you saying that?"

"Because Yue-san is the worst teacher ever!"

"Furthermore, she is such a natural genius that you will only be discouraged!"

"Shea!? Tio!?" Once upon a time, Shea and Tio had attempted to learn magic from Yue. But in the end, Yue had been stumped, wondering why concepts that seemed exceedingly elementary to her eluded her pupils. The fact that she hadn't been acting out of arrogance had actually crushed Shea and Tio's spirits and made them feel stupid. Incidentally, this was how Yue had tried to teach Shea and Tio:

"So, you gather your mana with a bwaaah, then you go all pew pew! After that, you need to follow up with a fwoosh! Simple, right?"

It was little wonder that Shea and Tio had been stumped. Yue turned to Hajime with teary eyes. She pointed at Shea and said, "They're being mean to me."

"Taniguchi. I'd recommend learning from Tio too. She's the best teacher among us."

"Huh!?"

Yue slumped to the ground. She'd never expected Hajime, of all people, to betray her.

I see... Everyone will betray you eventually... That's just how people are. You were right, copy... she thought to herself. She crawled over to a corner of the room and huddled there, hugging her knees. And as she sulked, she glared at Hajime, Shea, and Tio.

"I hate you guys..." she mumbled. Then, she buried her head in her knees. Suzu looked from her to Shea and the others, while Shizuku laughed dryly and Shea and Tio just shook their heads in exasperation. Hajime, on the other hand, looked pained, as did Ryutarou and Kouki for some reason. Kaori alone seemed happy by this turn of events. Grinning, she walked over to Yue, humming to herself as she did and looking absolutely ecstatic.

"Yue-sensei!" she exclaimed in a singsong voice. Shizuku looked up at the ceiling in exasperation while everyone else took a few steps back, expecting another fight to break out.

"Die, Kaori..."

"See, there's your problem! It's because you're always so mean to people that you suck at teaching."

On the surface, it seemed like Kaori was giving sound advice, but it was obvious from her expression that she was glad to have finally grasped one of Yue's few weaknesses. It was only around Yue that Kaori was ever this belligerent. Still, Hajime missed the days where she was the gentle goddess of his high school.

"Hey, I have an idea! Why don't you try teaching me? For example... how about you teach me how you changed your hair color with metamorphosis magic? What do you say?"

"Tch... You're just going to laugh at me and call my explanations incomprehensible!"

The only thing Yue was willing to teach Kaori was the meaning of pain. She lunged at the healer, but Kaori was used to Yue's violent outbursts, so she simply caught Yue's fist and said, "Now now, stop playing around and teach me properly."

Yue glared at Kaori for a few seconds, but then seemingly changed her mind and decided to play along with Kaori's charade.

"First, you squeeze your mana like all bwaaah. Then, you start kneading it like paaa. And finally, all that's left is to drop it out with a woosh!"

Shea and Tio turned to Suzu, as if to say “See, her explanations are incomprehensible.” Suzu’s expression stiffened and she gave them a nervous smile. Shizuku’s reaction was much the same. Neither of them had expected the perfect vampire princess to have such a glaring flaw. However—

“Umm, so I just go bwaaah, then paaa, then fwoosh... I did it!”

“Whaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaat!?”

Everyone’s eyes practically popped out of their skulls as they stared at Kaori. She’d actually succeeded in turning her silver hair black by following Yue’s incomprehensible explanation.

“See, you’re not bad at teaching at all, Yue. I got your explanation right away!”

“R-Really? You understood what I said?”

“Of course! You just go bwaaah, then paaa, then fwoosh! It’s a piece of cake!”

“Yeah... It is!”

Yue’s depressed expression transformed into a grin. She got to her feet and pointed at Shea and Tio, puffing her chest out so hard that it looked she was about to bend over backward all the while.

The two of them were still reeling from this revelation when Kaori added, “What’s gotten into you two? Why’re you being so mean to Yue?”

“W-We’re not trying to be mean, we just...”

“I-Indeed... How is it you can understand Yue’s explanation, anyway?”

Kaori cocked her head and replied in a confused voice, “I mean, her explanation’s just so simple, isn’t it?”

Tio clutched her chest and pitched to the ground while Shea’s eyes glazed over.

In the silence that followed, Suzu timidly said, “You really are good friends with Yue-oneesama, Kaorin.”

This time, Yue and Kaori didn’t deny it. They couldn’t. For once, they were in agreement. And so, Yue-sensei descended once more.

“Shea, Tio, Hajime. Shizuku, you too. On your feet!”

Yue’s damaged pride had recovered, and she was raring to teach once more. No one could stop her now. Hajime and the others exchanged glances, then wearily got to their feet.

“Alright, now repeat after me! Bwaaah, paaa, and fwoosh!”

Of course, no one repeated those words. After all, it would have been far too embarrassing to say meaningless sounds like that. However, Yue was a merciless teacher.

“I said repeat after me! It starts with bwaaah! Got it? Bwaaah! Now say it!”

“B-Bwaaah....”

“Bwaaah!”

Only Kaori seemed to be enjoying the impromptu lesson. Smiling, she raised her hands up in the air, making what was presumably a ‘bwaaah’ motion with them.

“I can’t hear the passion in your voice! Again! This time, say it with heart!”

Yue’s lesson continued for quite some time, making Hajime and the others all die inside.

Arifureta Magic Academy: Daddy, a Transfer Student, and a Victim

The ten-year-old prince of Heiligh, the kingdom that housed the infamous magic academy, had fallen in love. At least, that was what the rumors said. Supposedly, he’d come to the academy’s entrance ceremony as a guest and fallen in love with one of the students at first sight. Naturally, the students had started gossiping about who might be the potential future queen of Heiligh. The rumors only grew more pronounced when the school announced that Prince Lundel would be attending the academy from that day onward. He was the first member of the royal family who would be attending the academy. It was obvious to the students that he’d come here to chase his first love. And everyone wanted to see who he’d chosen. Ordinary student Hajime Nagumo absentmindedly listened to the students gossiping around him as he walked down the halls.

“I’ve finally found you, Hajime Nagumo!”

But he came to a stop when someone suddenly called out his name. Turning around, he saw the prince staring at him. He seemed to have a bone to pick with Hajime. The nearby students all stared at Lundel in surprise, then turned to look back accusingly at Hajime. They seemed to believe he’d done something to stir up trouble again. Of course, Hajime felt insulted that they believed all the previous commotions had been his fault.

“Good morning, Your Highness. Did you need something from me?”

A few of the watching students burst out laughing. Polite speech didn’t suit Hajime at all. Lundel was so focused on Hajime that he didn’t even notice the surrounding students’ reactions. He strode forward and declared, “I-I need to speak to you about your girlfriend!”

So the rumors were true!? The prince really did come here to chase after a girl!? the students thought. More and more people started gathering in the hallway.

And, at the same time, the students thought, *Wait, what does the prince’s first love have to do with Hajime Nagumo?*

Hajime himself was wondering the same thing. *Girlfriend? I have a girlfriend? Hang on, does this mean the girl the prince is in love with has something to do with me?*

His mind racing furiously, Hajime came to a horribly misguided conclusion. *Hang on, is he talking about Myu!? No way!*

Myu had been the new student representative during the entrance ceremony, and she was Hajime's adopted daughter. Everyone had seen her call Hajime "daddy," so they knew she was related to him in some way. *It all makes sense now... He's gotta be talking about Myu! So you're trying to lay a hand on my daughter, huh, you royal punk?*

Hajime was a textbook case of a doting parent. He met the prince's resolute gaze with a withering glare. Lundel, as well as the nearby students, all flinched back.

"Someone deploy a barrier! I'll get the underclassmen to safety!"

A weary upperclassman, used to dealing with the frequent incidents at school, started evacuating people from the area. Meanwhile, Lundel was lost in thought. *H-He's trying to cow me with that glare. He really doesn't want to hand over his girlfriend—Kaori.*

Indeed, the girl Lundel had fallen in love with was Kaori. He'd been swallowed whole by one of Yue's lightning dragons during the entrance ceremony, and afterward, the priestess had come to heal his injuries. He'd fallen for the saintly looking healer at first sight. Of course, he had no idea that Kaori had been part of the reason that the brawl at the entrance ceremony had occurred in the first place, or that she, along with Shea, Yue, and Tio, was considered one of the school's four problem children. Indeed, it was only because he didn't know what lay underneath Kaori's saintly exterior that he'd fallen in love with her. And thus, he'd come here to see what kind of man Kaori's sweetheart was.

"I've... heard about you."

He has? From who? Myu? Come to think of it, she is part of the elementary branch student council, and they were all there to greet the prince when he was first admitted to the school. She must have talked about me then. Well, if he's after my daughter, there's no need to be polite to him.

Hajime's misunderstanding grew even deeper, and he growled, "Oh? And what've you heard, huh?"

His lips curled up into a fearless smile.

"I-I asked her to marry me, but she said she couldn't because she was going to marry you."

Myu wants to marry me? Oh wait, she's probably just going through that phase all girls do where they say they want to marry their dad. Oh Myu, you're so cute and...

"She said she'd win your love by any means, get you to knock her

up, and start a happy family with you! And that she'd crush any rivals that stood in her way!"

"Wait, seriously!?"

Uhhh, Myu, are you that obsessed with me? Hang on, did you really use those words? I'm kinda shocked...

Cold sweat poured down Hajime's back as he tried to process this new information. He needed to rethink how to interact with his daughter.

"Hajime Nagumo! Answer me this! Do you intend to reciprocate her feelings!?"

Lundel was determined to see this through, for the sake of his beloved Kaori. On the other hand, Hajime was panicking now that he'd learned of his daughter's forbidden feelings. The spectating students had at this point heard the full story from the members of the newspaper club who'd come to see what was happening and knew that Kaori was Lundel's crush. But none of them knew that Hajime had made a grave misunderstanding. They were waiting to see what Hajime's response to Lundel's sincere question was. They wanted to know if Yue was his only love, or if he meant to take Kaori for himself too. Naturally, Hajime answered Lundel truthfully.

"I have... zero interest in reciprocating her feelings!"

Ooooooh, he really said it! While the students were whispering animatedly to each other, Lundel's eyes began to glimmer with hope. However, that hope was short-lived.

"But I have no intention of giving her to you, either!"

"What?"

Lundel wasn't the only one surprised by that. The onlookers were as well.

"Like hell I'll hand her over to some rando like you!"

What do you mean, "rando"!? *He's a prince, for crying out loud! One of the most influential people in the kingdom!* the students thought simultaneously.

"So even though you don't plan on accepting her feelings, you're still going to keep her tied to you!?"

"Hmph, she's just that important to me. Besides, she's still young. It's too soon for her to be thinking of marriage. I won't allow you to have her!"

How selfish can you get? Especially when you already have Yue-sensei!

But while the students were seething with jealousy, Lundel was thinking something else entirely. *Y-Young? How is Kaori too young? What is he talking about? Does he mean she's still immature?*

He, too, was beginning to misunderstand.

"I-Incidentally, what do you mean when you say she's young? She

doesn't look that way to me..."

The onlookers nodded in agreement. They turned to Hajime, waiting for his reply.

"I mean, just look at her. She obviously looks young."

"Sh-She does? A-Are you sure? I guess her face is a little childish, but..."

Both Lundel and the other students didn't really agree with Hajime's assessment there.

Wondering how Myu could possibly look mature to anyone, Hajime added, "If you don't think she looks young, I'll prove to you that she acts young. For starters, look at how spoiled she acts."

"R-Really!? Can you be more specific?"

The students were also very curious as to how Kaori acted spoiled.

"Hmm... Well, for starters, she's always asking for hugs."

"She is!? Unacceptabelievable! I want to princess carry her too!"

"Uhhh, did you not hear me? I said hugs, like, you know, normal hugs. From the front."

From the front!? What kinds of naughty things are you doing with Hajime, Kaori!?

"And she can't even sleep by herself still, so she always sneaks into my bed at night."

"She can't sleep by herself!?"

"Oh, and she's scared to go to the bathroom alone at night, so I have to go with her."

"She what!?"

"Also, she can't even wash her own hair properly."

"She can't!?"

Wait, Kaori-san, aren't you a bit too old to be doing those kinds of things? the students thought. Lundel, on the other hand, had latched onto a different part of Hajime's words.

"Hang on! How come you know she can't wash her own hair!?"

Oh yeah, good point! Don't tell me you two take baths together...

"Huh? Isn't that obvious? That's cause we take baths together."

"You... what?"

Lundel was so shocked that he dropped to all fours. Meanwhile, the students shivered in terror. The way Hajime had confessed that so casually had made it clear to them that he was too much of a Chad for any of them.

"Get it now? She's too young to be thinking about marriage still. At best, I'll allow you to be friends with her. If you try to ask her for anything more... I'll crush your balls."

The male students all covered their privates and took a few steps back. On the other hand, the girls were all amazed at how bold Kaori was. *I can't believe she takes baths with Nagumo-san...*

After a few seconds, Lundel recovered from his shock and got to his feet.

“D-Don’t think you’ve won just yeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeet!”

He turned on his heel and ran away, tears streaming from his eyes.

After a few seconds, Hajime said, “Heh, he’s got guts, at least.”

Surprisingly, he was smiling. In the end, the misunderstanding was never resolved. But, as a result, Hajime’s appraisal of Lundel had risen.

After school, a certain trio visited Kaori.

“Kaoriiiiii, how dare you sneak into Hajime’s bed! Pay for your sins with death!”

“Kaori-san, I can’t believe you take Hajime-san to the bathroom with you at night! How could you be so lewd!?”

“Kaori, is it true that you snuck into Master’s bath? If so, death is a fitting punishment for you.”

“Huh!? Wh-What are you talking about!? Calm down, you three!”

“Kaori, I... I will still accept you! Even if you can’t wash your own hair, I still love you—!”

“Your Highness!? What the heck are you talking about!?”

Naturally, that incident ended with a section of the school getting blown up. Sadly, the misunderstanding never got resolved, and for days after, people would shoot Kaori sympathetic looks when they saw her in school.

Super Tio

“What... did you say?”

A shocked voice rang out through the living room of Vandre Schnee’s hidden palace.

“A-Are you okay!? Do you feel sick!?”

“Did the fear get to you!? Should I cast healing magic on you!?”

Trembling, worried voices followed the shocked exclamation. The first voice had belonged to Hajime, while the second and third came from Shea and Kaori, respectively.

“Are you not being a tad too cruel!?” Tio hotly protested.

Yue gulped, everyone’s gazes were fixed on her.

“Yue! Why do even you seem so shocked!?” Tio gave Yue a hurt look. And with trembling hands, Hajime—

“And Master, why are your hands trembling!?”

Hajime massaged his temples, then turned to Suzu and Ryutarou.

“Taniguchi, Sakagami... You’re sure that’s what you saw?”

“Yep. I know it’s hard to believe, Nagumo-kun, but... it really was

Super Tio-san!"

"Yeah. The really scary thing is she was even more amazing than that time in Haltina..."

"Impossible."

"Master, I am nearing the end of my patience. If you keep this act up, I really will punch you in the face."

Tio cracked her knuckles, something no one had seen her do before. But Suzu continued to ignore her and exclaimed, "That was, without a doubt, Super Tio-san: Royalty Edition!"

This was the reason for the tension in the room. While they were having tea, Suzu and Ryutarou had told everyone about the regal, dignified Tio they'd witnessed during her trial. The story had left Hajime and the others speechless.

"Dammit, how come I keep missing it!? God, this is all your fucking fault!"

Hajime cursed as if he'd missed a once in a lifetime opportunity. He really wanted to see Super Tio, and this was the second time he'd missed his chance. He hung his head in despair, and Tio gave him a glare that was even more disparaging than Yue's.

"I do not understand. I have always been this way. Even when we were in Haltina, I simply did what needed to be done. Why are you all acting as though this is some hidden side of my personality that never otherwise appears?"

Tio had a point, but it seemed she wasn't aware of how ridiculous her normal actions seemed. Ignoring her question, Yue smiled reassuringly at Hajime and placed her hands over his.

"Now that I've obtained all the ancient magic, there's nothing I can't do..."

"Huh!? Can you really do it, Yue!?"

"Yep! Just leave it to me!"

Yue turned to Tio. Her obsession with Hajime was so great that she'd do whatever it took to grant his wish.

Sensing that her life was in danger, Tio quickly got up and muttered, "I-I have somewhere I need to be..."

"Where do you think you're going?"

Unfortunately, Yue circled around to cut her off.

"S-Stop—"

"I'll make you show your true colors with spirit magic! Become normal!"

Tio screamed as a flash of white light filled the room. A moment later—

"Fufu, what a troublesome child you are."

"Mmm!?"

When the light faded, Hajime and the others saw Tio carrying Yue

in her arms. She looked admonishingly down at Yue, like a mother scolding her naughty child. Hajime swallowed his surprise and attempted to rile Tio up to see what would happen.

“Hey, pervert.”

“Master, why the acerbic words? Have I done something to displease you?”

Instead of panting happily, she actually looked hurt. Hajime was so shocked he slid out of his sofa. Then, he glanced over at Shea and the others, who all nodded to him.

“It’s Super Tio-san!”

“My, you are all so energetic today.”

Tio smiled gently at everyone. This was, without a doubt, Super Tio.

“T-Tio? Can you put me down now?” Yue looked a little embarrassed as she asked.

“But Yue, even if you did this for Master’s sake, you still need to reflect on your actions.”

“Huh?”

“Do not ‘Huh’ me. You are the oldest person here, after me. If you do not act responsibly, what kind of example will that set for the others?”

“U-Umm... I’m sorry?”

Yue hadn’t expected to get lectured by Tio, of all people. Furthermore, Tio had a good point. There was nothing Yue could say to argue back, especially with how mature Tio looked. Seeing how easily Tio cowed Yue, everyone present realized that Super Tio was even more impressive than they’d imagined.

Suzu’s pupils turned into hearts and she whispered “Onee-sama...” in a husky voice. Even Kaori and Shizuku were enamored by this new, improved Tio.

Yue, who was still in Tio’s arms, glanced up at her and muttered, “S-So this is... a real dragonman... Amazing.”

Kouki was entranced by this new Tio as well. Ryutarou, however, was sitting in a meditative pose, repeating, “Don’t let her fool you! This is all a ruse!” to himself.

“Haaah, I forgot that this is what Tio-san is like when she gets serious. If only she’d act like this all the time, we... Wait, Hajime-san? What’s wrong?”

Shea had already seen Super Tio once before, and thus was less shocked. She turned to Hajime, but was surprised to see an expressionless look on his face. No, upon closer inspection, she realized he seemed almost frustrated. A second later, he got to his feet and pushed Suzu and Kaori, who were crowding around Tio, aside.

“Hey, Tio.”

“Yes, Master?”

Tio smiled gently at Hajime. However, he gripped both of her shoulders and shouted, “That’s not the reaction I want! This is all wrong! Tio!”

“Wh-What is it, Master? Please, calm down and—”

Though she was shaken, Tio quickly regained her composure and tried to calmly deal with Hajime. But he interrupted her with an anguished shout.

“You have to remember who you truly are!”

Even though it was his own fault Tio had become like this, Hajime couldn’t bear to witness Super Tio.

“You’re a pervert! A completely hopeless pervert!”

“E-Even if you are my master, I cannot allow you to—”

Hajime pressed down hard enough on Tio’s shoulders that they started to hurt. Tio, in turn, scrunched her face up in pain, but Hajime ignored her.

“You’re the only person in the whole world, no, the whole universe, who’d be happy to receive a pile driver in the ass!”

“Th-That was an unfortunate moment of indiscretion...”

“Wake up, Tio! You’re the kind of creepy pervert who’ll slide out of the bars of your cage and get your ass stuck and strip at inopportune moments! That’s who you really are!”

Yue and the others were speechless. They couldn’t believe Hajime was actually saying all of this to Tio when she was being serious for once. But, at the same time, he looked so desperate that they couldn’t bring themselves to interrupt him. They just looked back and forth between Hajime and Tio in confusion.

“You’re a worthless, perverted dragon who finds pleasure in even the most heinous of punishments!”

“...Heh.”

Huh? Is it just me... or does Tio-san suddenly look different... Shea though.

“You’re the beloved princess of the Klarus clan, aren’t you!?”

“Haaah... Haaah...”

“A Tio who’s just mature and understanding is like a hamburger without the patty! Or like flat soda! Or curry rice without the rice! You’re not Tio without the perverted parts of you!”

Tio looked up at Hajime, a look of ecstasy on her face as she waited for him to deliver the final blow.

“Return to your senses! I want the one and only super masochistic, perverted, Tio!”

“Aaaaaah! Please, insult me more, Master! Punish this perverted dragon!”

The old Tio had come back. Smiling, Hajime said, “Welcome back,

Tio.”

Drooling, Tio smiled lovingly.

“I have returned, Master. And you have cleared yet another one of my trials. I love you.”

“I don’t love you, though.”

“Oh, Master...”

Tio and Hajime both chuckled. Everyone else watched on, thinking, *You better take responsibility for this, Hajime.*

However, at the same time, they hated how they felt a little relieved at the return of normal Tio.

Arifureta Fairy Tales: Aladdin

Long ago, there lived a poor boy named Aladdin. His parents had wasted all their money buying anime merchandise and had fallen into poverty. But Aladdin himself was an otaku, so he couldn’t really complain.

However, one day, a magician claiming to be a distant relative of his appeared before Aladdin. The magician was covered from head to toe in a long robe, even their face was hidden under a large hood. Though they claimed to be a relative, they seemed quite suspicious to Aladdin. In fact, he had never seen anyone more suspicious in his life. He was certain the magician was a swindler of some sort. And thinking back, he remembered there had been plenty of scammers recently who’d been going around telling people about how there were amazing jobs where they could make thousands of dollars a day doing relatively little work, when in truth they were running around looking for people to kidnap and bring back to brothels and the like.

Believing the magician to be one such scammer, Aladdin drew the pistol he carried for self-defense and pointed it at the magician. Surprised, the magician jumped back and lowered their hood. They looked Aladdin over more carefully, then said in a surprised voice, “Sorry... I lied. I’m not related to you. I’m your wife.”

The magician’s statement just made her seem even more suspicious. Naturally, Aladdin replied, “I see. That makes sense. When are we holding the wedding?”

It appeared he’d taken the magician’s words at face value. Unfortunately, her beauty had captivated him, preventing him from thinking straight. It was her fault for being so damn pretty. Even if this was some kind of marriage fraud, Aladdin would happily let this beautiful magician defraud him.

“This afternoon...”

The magician’s eyes sparkled. She wasn’t even thinking of defrauding Aladdin anymore. Initially, she’d approached him with the

intent to scam him, but now all she cared about was becoming his bride. And thus, the pair were married just hours after their first meeting. But before they could hold their wedding ceremony, the magician asked one request of Aladdin.

“Before we get married... can you help me get a magic lamp from a cave?”

“What kind of magic lamp?”

“Mmm... Supposedly, a genie who can grant any wish lives within the lamp. If we have that...”

“If we have that, then what?”

“We’ll... be able to hold the greatest wedding ever.”

“Magician girl... are you a genius!?”

There was no one around to stop them. Aladdin and the magician headed to the cave for their first date, flirting all the while. They entered the cave together, and explored its depths, while talking about what other wishes they’d ask the genie for once they’d finished their wedding. They were tired of the desert, so they were thinking of asking the genie to build them a nice, white house on the coast. A house with a king-sized bed, of course. They neither tumbled into the abyss, nor had to worry about any seals, nor fight any dangerous guardians of the cave to reach the lamp. In fact, they found it quite easily. Believing they’d already succeeded, they grabbed the lamp and turned to leave. Unfortunately for them, trials often appear when one least expects them.

“Wait right there, Aladdin-kun! Don’t let that witch trick you!”

The princess of the country suddenly appeared at the entrance of the cave with a retinue of soldiers.

“How dare you trick Aladdin-kun into following you into this cave, you witch! What kind of obscene things were you planning to... I mean, what kind of naughty... I mean, what kind of horrible things were you planning to do to him!?”

“I’m worried about this country with you in charge!”

The magician glared at the princess, wondering how this country managed to run when its leaders were like this. She was, of course, unaware of the irony that she’d been acting basically the same way moments ago.

“Now come, Aladdin-kun! Marry me instead!”

Smiling, the princess proposed to Aladdin. The soldiers standing behind her all gave her disappointed looks. It was obvious they were worried for the future of this country as well.

Upon hearing the princess’ proposal, Aladdin said, “Uhhh, who the heck are you?”

He eyed the princess suspiciously. In truth, the princess had had her eye on Aladdin for quite some time now. One could even say she’d

been stalking him. However, they'd never actually met before. But when the princess had seen a witch suddenly appear before him, she'd rushed out without considering how strange it was for her to chase after a man she'd never actually talked to. It was little wonder that the soldiers seemed so disappointed.

"Hmph, you seem to be misunderstanding something, Princess. Aladdin's already my husband. Now, get out of here."

The witch clung to Aladdin and grinned at the princess. Aladdin hugged the witch back, and the princess' soldiers started urging her to return to the palace. However, the word retreat didn't exist in this love-struck princess' dictionary.

"Fine, now that it's come to this, there's no turning back! Come, genie of the ring!"

The princess rubbed the ring on her hand and chanted an incantation. A second later, a person appeared in midair.

"What is it, Princess? I have told you time and time again that I shall not recognize you as my master. You lack the sadistic temperament for it."

Apparently the princess' ring was a magical object that summoned a perverted, wish-granting genie.

"Pervert of the ring! Seal that witch in this cave! Then teleport me and Aladdin-kun to the castle!"

"As I said before, I have no intention of listening to... Oho!? Do mine eyes deceive me!? That young man over there seems to have the makings of a wonderful sadist! His sadist power levels are... over 9000!?"

It appeared the pervert of the ring had the special ability to measure the sadism levels of others. The moment she spotted Aladdin, her indifference toward the current proceedings vanished. By the time the witch realized this pervert was a threat, it was already too late.

"I have finally found the master I am fated to serve!"

"Pervert of the ring, please!"

"As you wish! Take this!"

The pervert of the ring snapped her fingers, and the princess, her soldiers, herself, and Aladdin all vanished in a puff of smoke. She'd teleported them all back to the princess' castle. At the same time, there was a deep rumbling, and the entrance of the cave collapsed, trapping the witch inside.

"C-Curse you, Princess..."

The witch angrily stamped her feet. She had to get her beloved Aladdin back somehow.

You'll pay for this, Princess... But before she could slaughter the princess or recover Aladdin, she needed to first get out of the cave.

"Hmph, you underestimated me."

Once her anger receded somewhat, the witch suddenly remembered she still had the lamp. She pulled it out of her pocket and stared at it. No doubt the princess was too busy fawning over Aladdin to even consider the possibility that there might have been a second genie summoning item.

“Wait for me, Aladdin. I’ll save you! Come, genie of the lamp!”

The witch rubbed the lamp, and a pair of bunny ears popped out of it in a puff of smoke.

“The bunny of the lamp has arrived! You rang?”

The bunny girl fully emerged from the lamp, her voluptuous breasts bouncing up and down. Looking at them annoyed the witch, but she pushed her feelings aside and cleared her throat.

“Get me out of this cave.”

“As you wish! Raaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

The genie fulfilled the witch’s wish through surprisingly physical means. She made a fist and punched through the rubble in one blow.

“Umm, next, can you take me to the castle?”

The witch asked hesitantly, worried her wish would be granted in a less-than-gentle manner.

“Your wish is my command! Come, get on my back! Hurry up now!”

“Uhhh, okay...”

The witch’s hopes that the bunny girl would teleport them like the pervert of the ring had were horribly dashed.

“Off we go! Dash like the wind!”

As the bunny girl promised, she did indeed dash like the wind. She brought the witch to the castle within seconds, and punched the hell out of any guards standing in her way. Then, she kicked open the castle gates and brought the witch to the princess’ room. Wordlessly, the bunny girl challenged the princess’ genie to a duel. After all, that was the only way to settle this feud.

And so, the bunny of the lamp and the pervert of the ring squared off, while the princess and the witch stared each other down. The battle began, and it was so ferocious that an entire section of the castle was destroyed in the ensuing turmoil. The soldiers guarding the castle began considering a career change, while the citizens in the city fled the palace’s vicinity.

“Aladdin-kun, if you marry me, you’ll be able to use the special magic of the royal family: authority! You’ll be able to grant all of your wishes, so marry me!”

“Mmm... what a vulgar approach. Don’t worry, Aladdin, I’ll grant any wish of yours myself.” The witch countered.

“Master, I’ll grant any of your wishes as well, so please make me your pet!”

“Aladdin-san! Don’t you want a bunny girl wife!? I’ll use force to grant any wish you have!”

All four girls professed their desire to grant all of Aladdin’s wishes. And, as he watched the castle get demolished around him, he voiced the only wish he had.

“I wanna go home...” he mumbled with glazed over eyes.

Some time later, rumors spread throughout the kingdom that a certain remote region of the desert was constantly being blown apart by four women who were fighting over a very fortunate, or perhaps very unfortunate boy. But despite their constant bickering, it appeared they were all good friends.

Vandre-san’s Secret Room

“Nagumoooooooooooo! Can you come over here for a sec?” Ryutarou’s voice echoed through Vandre’s palace. Hajime, who’d been reclining in the living room, turned around.

“What is it?”

Ryutarou, who still had boundless amounts of energy, had been exploring the palace along with Kouki and Suzu. It had been ten minutes since he’d set off, and judging by his panicked voice, it seemed like he’d gotten himself into some kind of mess. Hajime exchanged glances with Yue and the others, and they all gave him rueful smiles.

“Nagumo-kuuuuuuuuun!”

Suzu started calling for Hajime as well, but her voice seemed more full of curiosity than panicked.

“Good grief. Ryutarou and Suzu both have far too much energy,” Shizuku muttered to herself.

See, this is why everyone calls you their mom...

“Nagumo-kun?”

Shizuku smiled darkly at Hajime. It was as if she could read his thoughts.

“Seems they found something. Let’s go see what it is.”

It looked like Shizuku was about to awaken to her own stand, and that was the last thing Hajime wanted to have to deal with. And so, he quickly changed the subject and got to his feet. They found Ryutarou and the others standing around inside a small room in a corner of the first floor.

When Ryutarou spotted Hajime, he excitedly pointed to a spot on the wall and said, “Look! Look!”

He was pointing to a small passage that contained a staircase leading downward.

“The hell’s this?”

“So I was looking through this room, and when I crouched down to examine something, I accidentally smacked my head against this part of the wall.”

“Oh, and then it caved in to reveal this?”

Ryutarou scratched his head awkwardly and nodded. Apparently, he'd managed to hit a hidden switch with his head entirely by accident. And that switch had revealed this underground passage.

“A hidden room inside one of the Liberators' houses... That does seem pretty interesting.”

“I know, right!?”

Ryutarou looked like an excited puppy. Suzu seemed just as eager to explore the hidden depths of Vandré's palace. Kouki, on the other hand, looked like he was trying to restrain himself, but even he seemed curious. Yue and the others were interested in this hidden passage as well, so there seemed little reason not to explore.

“Maybe he hid some artifacts here like Oscar did with his Treasure Trove. We might as well swipe whatever we... I mean, make use of whatever's available.”

“Mmm... There's no point in trying to sound like we're not stealing, Hajime.”

Shea and the others nodded in agreement with Yue's assessment. Hajime ignored them and stepped into the passage. After they got going down the staircase, they found something in the landing below. There was a display case stuck inside the ice wall at the end of the passage, and sitting inside that display case was—

“Why glasses!?”

A pair of glasses. They were black-rimmed, and placed very delicately in the display case, as if they were extremely important. As Hajime approached, the bottom of the display case lit up, causing the lenses to glimmer with reflected light. The whole scene was obviously scripted, and it kind of annoyed Hajime that Vandré was trying to make it look like these glasses had been waiting for a worthy bearer for thousands of years.

“Oh, Hajime-san! Look, there's an inscription on the ice!”

“Oh? Let's see what it says... ‘Here sleeps my best friend.’”

“I-Is it just me, or is he making it sound like the glasses themselves are his friend?” Shizuku said as her expression stiffened, and everyone else nodded in agreement.

However, Hajime muttered, “No, that's not it. These... These glasses are Oscar Orcus.”

“Hajime-kun, I think you might still be exhausted from making the key. Here, I'll cast restoration magic on you.”

Everyone shot worried looks at Hajime as silver light rained down on him.

“Hang on, guys. You’re misunderstanding me. Oscar wrote about this in his journal. He said all his friends thought he loved his glasses so much that his soul secretly resided inside them.”

“Oh? So the Liberators were pranksters?”

Suzu’s guess was right on the money, though she had no way of knowing it. Even so, she could just imagine Vandre saying something like, “Since you’re actually just your glasses, I’ll leave you here to show you off to future generations!”

The party continued onward, following the passage as it turned. Once they rounded the corner, they found something new.

“I-It’s so cool!” the three guys all said simultaneously. It was rare for them to be in sync like that, but it made sense, considering what they were staring at. A blue, rose patterned sword made of ice. The inscription on the plinth the sword was thrust into read, “Blue Rose Frost Blade.” As the name suggested, the sword was made entirely out of ice. Furthermore, everything from the hilt to the blade had rose-patterned carvings engraved into it. It looked like a legendary sword waiting to be drawn by some chosen hero. Any man would have been excited to see something like this.

“N-Nagumo! Can I try pulling it out!?”

“What, but... No, you’re the one who found this place, Sakagami... Fine, you try first.”

“I wanna try pulling it out too, Ryutarou...”

“You already have a special sword, Kouki! You can’t cheat on it!”

“Don’t phrase it like that! Wait, hang on! My Holy Sword’s flickering!”

“See, Amanogawa? It’s telling you not to cheat.”

“You’re the last person I want to hear that from, Nagumo!”

The girls watched the boys fawn over the sword with exasperated looks. As far as they could tell, it was just a sword made out of ice. Sure, it was pretty, but Hajime’s missiles were way more powerful than it. Naturally, they didn’t understand the excitement boys felt upon seeing cool-looking anime swords.

“Hurry up and pull it out already, Ryutarou,” Tio urged.

“O-Okay, Tio-san.”

Ryutarou was surprised to hear Tio sound so exasperated. She was normally extremely accommodating. He quickly grabbed the hilt, and Hajime and Kouki gulped. Yue and the others watched with bemused smiles.

“Here I goo!”

Ryutarou’s muscles bulged, but the legendary ice sword didn’t even budge.

“I’m next!” Hajime shouted.

“Hang on, you’re a gunner, Nagumo! I’m the swordsman, so I

should go next!”

“Yeah, but you’ve already got a legendary sword! You can’t cheat on it!”

“Stop calling it cheating! You don’t have the right to talk about cheating, anyway!”

The two boys grappled for a few seconds, but then Suzu noticed something and walked over to the plinth.

“Oh, there’s more written over here. Let’s see... Only those who wish to eliminate glasses from this world can draw this sword. If you are found worthy, it is your sacred duty to destroy all glasses!”

Just how much did you hate Oscar, Vandre!? everyone thought simultaneously.

“B-But didn’t he put those glasses up on display earlier? He must have gotten those from Oscar-san, right? Surely they were friends, right?” Kaori asked, desperately looking about for a reason to believe that the Liberators had all been close.

Seeing her distress, Hajime muttered, “Come to think of it, Oscar mentioned in his diary that Vandre was half-demon, half-dragoman.”

“Oho? Is that so? Judging by all the ice around here, he must have been an ice dragon, no?”

“Yeah. And there was a sword similar to this one in Oscar’s workshop.”

“Hang on a second, Nagumo-kun. I have a bad feeling about where you’re going with this.”

“You guessed it. The sword was called Dragon Slayer.”

Those two must have fought like cats and dogs... Yue and the others thought to themselves.

“Hmm, but you know, when all’s said and done, it looks like they cared a lot about each other. I mean, they left behind these mementos of each other, didn’t they?”

Smiling wryly after saying that, Shea turned to Kaori and Yue. Everyone else’s gazes shifted over to them as well, and they all smiled knowingly at the two girls.

“I-It’s not the same situation! I really do hate Kaori!”

“I-It’s not the same situation! I really do hate Yue!”

The two of them responded in perfect sync. Then, they glared at each other, mad that the other had stolen their line. In retrospect, it was entirely possible Oscar and Vandre had shared an identical relationship...







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by Ryo Shirakome

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